August 26, 2026 • $7.99

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Editorials

California's wealth tax is already failing

California Democrats have not even successfully passed their wealth tax ballot proposition, and they are already admitting it will fail to work as advertised. That is just one of the takeaways from a revealing social media exchange between wealth tax backer Rep. Ro Khanna (D-CA) and billionaire entrepreneur Mark Cuban.

Responding to a video posted by Khanna celebrating the California Democratic Party's official endorsement of Proposition 40, a ballot initiative that would impose a one-time tax equal to 5% of billionaires' net worth in the state, Cuban noted that many founders of successful technology startups become billionaires on paper long before they have anything approaching the tens of millions they would need to pay the wealth tax. Taxing that wealth would therefore force them to sell stock, borrow against it, or somehow extract cash from a growing company.

"If this passes," Cuban went on, "you can bet if I'm investing in a multi-billion dollar startup, I'm asking them to move from California first... If this passes, only idiot startup founders stay in Cali."

Khanna's answer was a government loan. Illiquid founders, he suggested, could pledge their shares to California, borrow the money needed to pay the tax, and then repay the state over perhaps 10 years. If they could not repay, California would take the shares.

"Ro, that's insane," Cuban responded. "You want the state to loan money to the founder, who will then immediately give it back to the state as a wealth tax? Meaning the state has not received any incremental receipts? What's the point of that? Unless of course you want the government to own shares."

Cuban may be onto something. Not only has Khanna himself said he has "no problem" with the federal government owning shares of Intel, but Sens. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) and Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) have both explicitly supported federal ownership of technology-company stock.

Rep. Ro Khanna (D-CA)

Billionaire entrepreneur Mark Cuban

MEG KINNARD/AP

Even if Proposition 40 never results in California owning a single share of a technology company, it would still be terrible economic policy.

The most obvious problem is that billionaires can move. UC Berkeley economist Enrico Moretti, who supports higher federal taxes on the ultra-wealthy, studied billionaire migration with Federal Reserve economist Daniel Wilson and found that when states impose estate taxes — the closest real-world analog to a wealth tax — roughly one in five billionaires leaves. California already has a 13.3% top income-tax rate, compared with zero individual income tax in Texas and Florida. Proposition 40 would make that competitive disadvantage even worse.

That would hurt taxpayers who are not billionaires. California's Legislative Analyst estimates that Proposition 40 would raise only "tens of billions of dollars," far below supporters' $100 billion claim, while eventually costing the state hundreds of millions of dollars or more every year as wealthy residents leave and stop paying California income taxes.

But today's billionaires are not even the biggest concern. Tomorrow's entrepreneurs are.

As Moretti notes, California's prosperity depends heavily on founders choosing to start and grow companies there. Google alone employs roughly 85,000 Californians, pays them $32 billion annually in wages, benefits, and stock compensation, and generates billions more in employee and corporate tax revenue. Losing only a handful of future Googles because founders choose Austin or Miami instead of Silicon Valley could swamp whatever temporary revenue Proposition 40 produces.

Nor should voters put much faith in the word "temporary." California voters approved a supposedly temporary tax increase on high earners in 2012. It was subsequently extended for another 16 years. Entrepreneurs making investment decisions over decades will reasonably assume that Sacramento could extend a wealth tax as well.

California has already taxed and regulated its entertainment, manufacturing, and energy sectors into mere shadows of what they once were. If California Democrats want to do to Silicon Valley what they did to the rest of the state's productive economy, then by all means they should listen to Khanna and pass Proposition 40. ★

FOR OUR READERS

Have a tip? See anything we've missed? Need a correction? Drop us a line at **feedback@washingtonexaminer.com**

Trump is harming the Navy

President Donald Trump has a constitutional obligation to check his ego at the door when it comes to military readiness. Increasingly, he is failing to do so, and it is having deleterious consequences for the Navy.

Trump reacted petulantly to concerns about conditions aboard the *USS Abraham Lincoln* aircraft carrier. Operating in the Arabian Sea, the carrier was supposed to return home in June. But the war with Iran has significantly extended its deployment. The crew and carrier air wing have had just one liberty port call during their long voyage, a single-day stop in Guam in December 2025. They have now spent more than six months at sea, working seven days a week, 12 hours or more each day, under wartime conditions.

This would strain sailors at the best of times. Iranian strikes on U.S. logistics bases in the Middle East mean the *Abraham Lincoln* has also experienced delays in deliveries of food, mail, and other quality-of-life supplies. Some aboard have suffered mental health problems, and families back home are concerned.

When asked last week whether he believed the carrier had been deployed for too long, Trump lashed out. The ship, he said, had been deployed "not nearly long enough." This is childish and unbecoming rhetoric from the president. The majority of those aboard this ship are young men, about half of them on their first deployment. The least this crew deserves is gratitude from the commander in chief.

Trump could have said something like, "It's very tough. I wish we could have these patriots back with their families right now. Sadly, national security means we have to ask them to stay a little longer." Instead, he allowed his dislike of any criticism and his frustration with the stalemated war with Iran to be expressed as scorn for dedicated Americans.

Trump has also doubled down on Trump-class battleships. The Navy wants to build a new class of air-defense destroyers that can balance fleet size with more robust combat power. Striking this balance is crucial to deterring and, if necessary, defeating China's vast and capable military. But Trump values the size and prestige of a warship over its military usefulness. The battleships will carry formidable armaments and tremendous power. But measured by financial cost, shipyard requirements, and total combat power, they play into China's hands. The Navy will have warned Trump about these concerns before he made his decision.

Unfortunately, Trump's focus on warship aesthetics over combat power extends to aircraft carriers.

The president continues to insist that the Navy redesign its new Gerald Ford-class aircraft carriers to replace electromagnetic launch catapults with older steam-powered systems. But while steam catapults are simpler, they are less energy-efficient and cause greater stress to aircraft. This is especially relevant with the advent of light unmanned drones. Steam catapults require extensive piping and, therefore, major redesigns. It is worth noting that the Navy's record of successfully executing late-stage redesigns is awful.

It gets worse. As reported on Saturday, Trump also wants the Navy to redesign carriers so that their "island" command towers sit farther forward rather than toward the rear. The president prefers this more historic look. Naval architects place islands toward the rear of aircraft carriers not because some admiral thought they looked better there, but for operational reasons. These include aircraft deck maneuvering and concerns involving line of sight, radar control, and airflow during landing.

The president needs to reconsider. Trump deserves credit for bolstering U.S. military resources. But the war in Iran should have taught him that major military decisions are fraught with risk. The war has heavily damaged Iran's nuclear and military power, but it has also gutted U.S. military munitions and degraded readiness against China.

Trump owes the country, and those who serve it, a Navy built around warfighting effectiveness rather than his personal preferences. ★

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We owe $40 trillion — $120,000 each

News that the national debt has risen above $40 trillion resonated like a ringing bell in my mind. It registered that America is 16 times deeper in its fiscal hole than it was when I first reported on this chronic ailment back in the late 1980s.

I've just reread one of my dispatches from Wall Street to Fleet Street, written in early 1989, when the $2.6 trillion debt and related alarm over the $155 billion annual budget deficit were causing ructions between President George H.W. Bush and Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan.

Bush had just taken office, elected on a promise not to raise taxes, and hoped the country's economic growth would eliminate deficit spending by 1993. Greenspan said the president's deficit-cutting plans were based on misguided assumptions.

It seems almost quaint now, looking back on what was then regarded as a fiscal emergency. This July, deficit spending for the previous 12 months was $1.9 trillion; that's $158 billion a month, slightly more than the sum by which we overspent in the whole year when Bush and Greenspan were arguing.

It's not just the numbers that make the comparison between then and now so striking. It's also the attitude of the public and its elected representatives at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue.

Although Americans and their government were clearly living beyond their means in the last century, they at least recognized it as a problem. There was a widespread, if facile, feeling that "something must be done." There was talk of a national debt summit.

No such worry is detectable today either in the White House or on Capitol Hill. A few, still, small, voices of disquiet may faintly be heard here and there, but President Donald Trump is evidently uninterested in spending cuts, which are unpopular, and in Congress, the fight, if it can be called anything so vigorous, is not about cuts but about restraining spending growth.

Out in election land, socialism is a rising tide, particularly among young voters who, because their economic prospects are not as good as those of their parents, increasingly want government to provide them with free stuff. But in America, as our 16th president noted, government is of, by, and for the people. So the feds pay for things, as magical socialist thinking desires, it means the people — all of us — are the ones who'll be reaching into our wallets. The government is us, not someone else. It can't give us anything of net value. All it can do is take money out of one of our pockets and put it back into the other.

In a time of relative peace and abundant prosperity, we are overspending by as much as we did to win the war against Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. It's reasonable to rack up deficits in such a titanic struggle as that, but we now rack them up just to pay our day-to-day living expenses. There are 335 million Americans — each of us owes more than $119,000.

That resonant clang of $40 trillion in debt should reverberate in all our heads, especially in the minds of those we elect to govern the nation on our behalf. As John Donne cautioned in 1623, "send not to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee." ★

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Washington Examiner (ISSN 2641-094X), a division of Clarity Media Group, is published weekly (except one week in each of the following months, January, February, April, July, August, September, November, and two weeks in December) at 1152 15th St., NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20005-1799.. Periodicals postage page at Washington, DC, and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to Washington Examiner, P.O. Box 37979 Boone, IA 50037. For subscription customer service in the United States, call 1-800-274-7293. For new subscription orders, please call 1-800-274-7293. Please send new subscription orders and changes of address to Washington Examiner, P.O. Box 37979 Boone, IA 50037. Please include your latest magazine mailing label. Allow 3 to 5 weeks for arrival of first copy and address changes. Canadian/foreign orders require additional postage and must be paid in full prior to commencement of service. Canadian/foreign subscribers may call 202-903-2000 for subscription inquiries. American Express, Visa/Mastercard, Discover and PayPal payments accepted. Cover price, $7.99. Back issues, $7.99 (includes postage and handling). Send letters to the editor to Washington Examiner, 1152 15th Street, NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20005-1799. For a copy of Washington Examiner Privacy Policy, visit www.washingtonexaminer.com or write to Customer Service, Washington Examiner, 1152 15th Street, NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20005-1799. Copyright 2026, Clarity Media Group. All rights reserved. No material in Washington Examiner may be reprinted without permission of the copyright owner. Washington Examiner is a registered trademark of Clarity Media Group.

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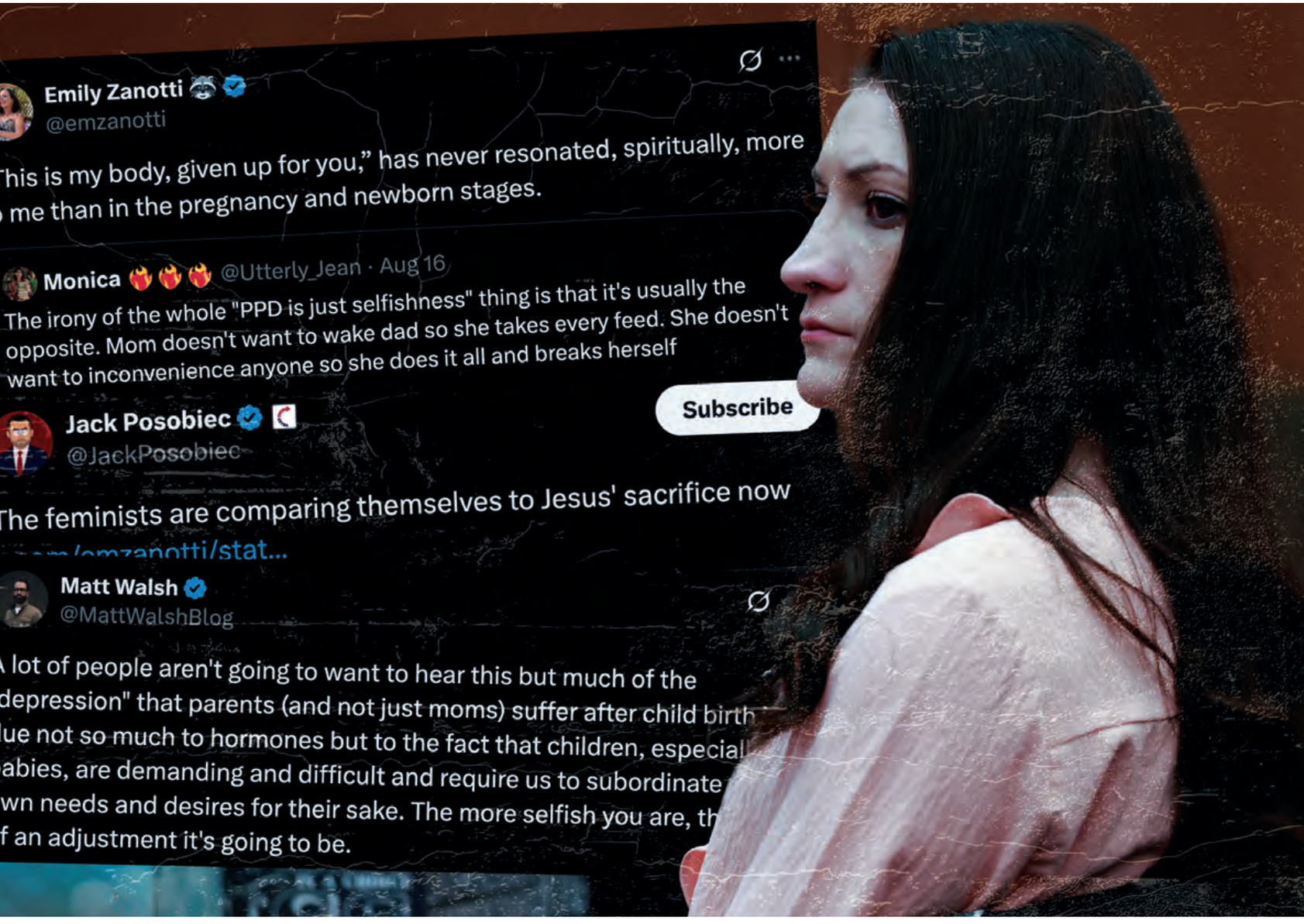
Emily Zanotti
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This is my body, given up for you," has never resonated, spiritually, more
me than in the pregnancy and newborn stages.
Monica @Utterly_Jean · Aug 16
The irony of the whole "PPD is just selfishness" thing is that it's usually the
opposite. Mom doesn't want to wake dad so she takes every feed. She doesn't
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The feminists are comparing themselves to Jesus' sacrifice now
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A lot of people aren't going to want to hear this but much of the
depression" that parents (and not just moms) suffer after child birth
due not so much to hormones but to the fact that children, especial
babies, are demanding and difficult and require us to subordinate
own needs and desires for their sake. The more selfish you are, th
of an adjustment it's going to be.

GETTY IMAGES/WASHINGTON EXAMINER ILLUSTRATION

The Anti-Family Right

Conservatives for decades have carried the pro-family mantle against a Left that is sometimes radical in its antipathy to marriage and parenthood.

Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), the preeminent elected official on the Left, has suggested that it's immoral to have children because of climate, and that the parent-child relationship is itself "carceral" (because of timeouts).

Prestige left-wing publications tell us that divorce is freedom, and 2024 Democratic presidential nominee Kamala Harris chose as her closing argument the idea that heterosexual wives are all oppressed.

RESTORING AMERICA

Throw in the "polyamory" lobbying, and you'd be forgiven for thinking the American Left today is home to the anti-family sentiment that will further suppress our birth rate.

But then you get on X, and you have to wonder if the men of the online Right have placed big bets on Kalshi that marriage and birth rates will fall another 25% in the next couple of years.

In reaction to deranged feminists on TikTok defending child-killer Lindsay Clancy, a bunch of conservative commentators decided to attack new mothers suffering postpartum depression.

"Much of the 'depression' that parents (and not just moms) suffer after child birth is due not so much to hormones but to the fact that children, especially babies, are demanding and difficult and require us to subordinate our own needs and desires for their sake," Matt Walsh posted. "The more selfish you are, the

more of an adjustment it's going to be."

In the X eruption that followed, a bunch of right-wing dudes demonstrated a pretty broad disdain for women, especially the pregnant and recently pregnant types.

Catholic, conservative writer and mother Emily Zanotti responded to all this dreck by pointing out that Christians, of all people, ought to revere pregnancy as a noble sacrifice. "'This is my body, given up for you,' has never resonated, spiritually, more to me than in the pregnancy and newborn stages," she posted.

Trumpist commentator Jack Posobiec scoffed, "The feminists are comparing themselves to Jesus' sacrifice now."

A conservatism that denigrates pregnancy and motherly sacrifice is basically the conservatism of left-wing feminists' caricature.

Of course, a party that nominates and appoints known philanderers Ken Paxton, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., Pete Hegseth, and Donald Trump is the party that makes the left-wing feminists' case against marriage.

Throw in the vaguely pagan and clearly misogynistic tone of the "manosphere," and old-fashioned ideas like love, marriage, and babies are feeling alien in more and more places along the ideological spectrum.

—By Timothy P. Carney

The Independent Nones

It is an easy and entertaining setup. Recruit one fervent believer and one atheist, give them microphones, and let them have at it. And that is exactly what happened when Catholic New York Times columnist Ross Douthat debated atheist psychologist Steven Pinker on the subject, "Do we need God?" inside Manhattan's Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church earlier this year.

Asked by moderator Sarah Isgur whether America had replaced the tribalism of religion with the tribalism of politics, Pinker claimed, "That is not true. If that was true, then the least religious people would be the most politicized and polarized. But in fact, the most politically committed faction in the United States are evangelical Christians, and they are the most polarized in the sense of thinking the worst view of the other side."

"However, the nones," Pinker continued, "the people who say when asked what their religion is they say 'nothing in particular,' they are the least politically polarized. That is, they have the most centrist and the most charitable view of the other party. So it is not the case that the more religion, the less politics, and vice versa. If anything, they seem to be correlated."

★★★

While it is true that people who tell pollsters their present religion is 'nothing in particular' are also the least polarized religious grouping of Americans, what atheist psychologist Steven Pinker fails to mention, or perhaps does not know, is that the vast majority of these 'nothings' actually do believe in God, and many even pray regularly. As a group, these nothings are, in fact, not the least religious Americans.

Pinker is being a little too clever for his own good here. While it is true that people who tell pollsters their present religion is "nothing in particular" are also the least polarized religious grouping of Americans, what Pinker fails to mention, or perhaps does not know, is that the vast majority of these "nothings" actually do believe in God, and many even pray regularly. As a group, these nothings are, in fact, not the least religious Americans.

That honor would go to Pinker's own atheists, who, in addition to not believing in God, are every bit as politically polarized as evangelicals, perhaps even more so, just in the opposite direction.

According to Pew, an overwhelming 78% of atheists identify as Democrats, compared with just 72% of evangelicals who identify as Republicans. Meanwhile, the nothings are more evenly split, with 54% identifying as Democrats and 37% as Republicans.

What Pinker and Douthat may find even more surprising is that Pinker's atheists represent just a tiny minority of the nones. Less than one-fifth of nones consider themselves atheists — 17%, to be exact — while 83% of nothings believe in God or a higher power.

And the nothings are becoming even less partisan as time goes on. Those who were raised in a religion but left it — the "nonverts," if you will — are far more

likely to be partisan Democrats than the average adult. But among those of us who were raised without any religious identity — the "always nones" — just 24% of the most recent generation identify as Democrats, while more than half identify as independent.

So the next time someone tells you they don't belong to a church, don't assume they are a Democrat. The nones are not a secular voting bloc marching uniformly to the Left. Many are believers, many are politically moderate, and among younger Americans raised without religion, independents now dominate.

Losing religion does not necessarily mean finding the Democratic Party.

—By Conn Carroll

Bread Lines or Bread Winning? The Democratic Party's Fatal Leftward Drift

The Democratic Party as we know it is on the verge of collapse, nearly ready to capitulate to the ideology responsible for more deaths in the 20th century than 10 COVID-19 pandemics. It's not just a small fringe of leftists anymore — according to a new poll, 58% of Democrats have a positive view of socialism, while 50% view capitalism negatively.

What should be (but isn't) more astonishing is that the more educated a Democrat is, the more likely he or she is to support socialism. Just having a college degree boosts the favorability rating to 71%, per the CBS News Poll. Were they not taught about the horrors of socialism? Evidently not, based on its 18% disapproval rating. But if you've stepped onto a college campus in the last decade, you'd know communism is practically a prerequisite for becoming a faculty member at most schools.

The Democratic Party has not always been this way. Going back to 2010, more Democrats supported capitalism (51%) than socialism (50%), per Gallup. In 2012, 55% favored capitalism compared to 51% for socialism. The far-left shift began in 2016, when socialism beat out capitalism for the first time. And now, there's never been such a wide favorability gap between socialism and capitalism before. The recent CBS poll showed a 26-point gap among Democrats, with 58% supporting socialism and 32% supporting capitalism. A Gallup poll from last year showed a 24-point gap, which was the largest at the time, with 66% for socialism and 42% for capitalism.

This leftward shift doesn't just show up in the economy. The Democrats used to support strong borders, the nuclear family, Israel, and the Second Amendment. Not too long ago, former President Barack Obama was elected while opposing gay marriage. Today, the Left is all about "gender transitions" for children, open borders, banning guns, racial Marxism, Hamas apologetics, and abortion up until birth. Republicans have also become more liberal over time — with many today supporting abortion, gay marriage, and an expanded social safety net. Yet, the liberal media would have you believe the Republicans have gone off the rails and are mainstreaming right-wing extremism. The word for that is "projection."

The victims of socialism have been warning America not to make the mistakes their countries have made. From Latin America to Eastern Europe to Asia, the socialist experiment has been tried. The results? Concentration camps, mass killings, bread lines, and mass starvation to the point where, in the case of Venezuela, they were eating zoo animals. Socialism hasn't worked, not even one time! Capitalism, despite its flaws, has lifted over 1 billion people out of poverty since 1990 alone. Why aren't they teaching that in college?

The Left has weaponized the "affordability crisis," a crisis largely of their own making through overspending and overregulation, and their proposed solution is to double and triple down on the socialistic policies that brought us the $20 burrito. If liberals really want to bring costs down, more capitalism is the answer. Let's stop throwing money at problems, expecting them to go away — such as California's $24 billion homelessness program that resulted in a 20% larger homeless population — and instead reduce the government's burden on business, a proven solution that creates jobs and wealth and cuts costs.

So what'll it be, Democrats? Bread lines or bread winning? There's the Democratic Socialists of America path to Soviet Russia, where you can virtue signal your way to the gulags, and there's the "cold, callous" capitalist path to prosperity. The latter will make America great again for everyone of every background. The former will score you social credit points in the regime. Choose wisely.

—By Peter Cordi

★★★

The victims of socialism have been warning America not to make the mistakes their countries have made. From Latin America to Eastern Europe to Asia, the socialist experiment has been tried. The results? Concentration camps, mass killings, bread lines, and mass starvation to the point where, in the case of Venezuela, they were eating zoo animals. Socialism hasn't worked, not even one time!

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How Yellowstone Changed the World

The story of the world's first national park

Stand still for long enough in Yellowstone National Park and you begin to feel a landscape whose history reaches far back in time and holds countless tales. In 1872, one of those stories changed everything, influencing how people would come to see and protect places like Yellowstone around the world.

More than 11,000 years ago, archaeological evidence shows that people were living in and moving through what is now known as Yellowstone National Park. For much of the world, however, the region remained unknown.

When explorer John Colter left the Lewis and Clark Expedition to travel alone through the region, his descriptions of what he had seen and experienced were met with disbelief. He spoke of boiling mud, kaleidoscopic hot springs, mineral terraces, and water shooting skyward from the earth itself. His accounts were dismissed as exaggeration, and skeptics mockingly referred to the place as "Colter's Hell."

It wasn't until the expeditions of 1870 and 1871 that perceptions began to shift. Surveyors, artists, and photographers documented the region, and what had once sounded impossible began to be recognized as a national wonder.

On March 1, 1872, that evidence led to a turning point: President Ulysses S. Grant signed the Yellowstone National Park Protection Act into law, creating the country's first national park. It would go on to become a global model for protected areas, influencing the creation of over 1,200 national parks in more than 100 countries.

It was a bold decision, though its significance was not fully understood at the time. It set aside a landscape shaped by geothermal forces and wildlife, protecting it from commercial development.

Over time, its importance became undeniable. Yellowstone contains the largest concentration of thermal features on Earth, including more than 10,000 hot springs, geysers, fumaroles, mud pots, and terraces, and over 500 active geysers. Among them, Steamboat, the tallest active geyser in the world, can propel water more than 350 feet into the air.

A Myth Debunked

The idea that Yellowstone was untouched by humanity is misleading. For thousands of years before it became a national park, Native Americans lived in and traveled through this region. They hunted and fished, gathered plants, quarried obsidian, and used the thermal waters for both practical and spiritual purposes.

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When the park was established, many of these communities were displaced by government and military forces. In the years that followed, a narrative emerged claiming Native Americans had not occupied the area because they were "afraid of the geysers." Archaeological evidence, highlighted by anthropologist Douglas H. MacDonald, shows Native presence in the region dating back to the time of mammoths and mastodons.

Today, more than 1,800 archaeological sites have been identified within Yellowstone, though only a small fraction of the park has been thoroughly investigated. As this growing body of evidence reshapes our understanding of the region's deep history, it also underscores its living connections.

Twenty-seven Native American tribes are now officially associated with Yellowstone National Park, maintaining enduring ties to its lands and resources. In 2022, the Yellowstone Tribal Heritage Center opened at Old Faithful, creating a dedicated space for Indigenous voices and perspectives within the park.

A National Park in the Making

In its early years, Yellowstone existed more on paper than in practice, as the 1872 act established the park without creating a system to manage it. The first civilian superintendent, Nathaniel Langford, had no salary or staff and rarely visited, as he remained occupied with other positions.

His successor, Philetus W. Norris, took a more active role, overseeing road construction, developing visitor facilities, and hiring the park's first gamekeeper, Harry Yount, widely regarded as the first national park ranger. Despite these efforts, enforcement remained weak, and poaching, logging, and damage to geothermal features continued.

In 1886, management passed to the United States Army, which operated from Fort Yellowstone

ROOSEVELT ARCH

in Mammoth Hot Springs and oversaw the park for more than three decades. Buffalo Soldiers, African American regiments of the U.S. Army, played a crucial role in the early protection of Yellowstone National Park from the 1890s into the early 1900s before the National Park Service existed. They patrolled against poachers, fought fires, and built infrastructure, including the 1896 experimental bicycle corps ride through the park.

Many of the structures built during that period still stand today, and the conservation practices developed there would later help shape the creation of the National Park Service in 1916. As visitor numbers grew, major lodges such as Old Faithful Inn and Lake Yellowstone Hotel were built, reflecting what is now known as early 20th-century "parkitecture," and the park became increasingly structured and accessible.

Yellowstone eventually shifted to civilian management under Superintendent Horace M. Albright, whose leadership helped establish standards that would influence national park management across the United States. Many of the early civilian rangers and administrators had prior military service, carrying forward experience from army stewardship into the emerging National Park Service system.

A New Era of Stewardship

Yellowstone has long needed people to help protect and sustain it. Today, Xanterra Travel Collection® is the park's primary authorized concessioner, operating nine lodges, four campgrounds, an RV park, and a network of restaurants, bars, and visitor services across the park under Yellowstone National Park Lodges.

Stewardship in Yellowstone has taken different forms over time, from Indigenous communities who have long lived with and maintained relationships to the land, to early preservation efforts, and now to a modern system dedicated to balancing access with care. It remains a quiet responsibility, reflected in every visit, in how people move through the park, stay in it, and leave it

For more information about Yellowstone, visit YellowstoneNationalParkLodges.com.

California Bans (Most) Tires

A worker mounts a tire at Robert's Tire and Wheels in San Francisco.

California Democrats continue to jack up gas prices and tell Californians what kind of cars they are allowed to buy. Now, the state also wants to dictate what kind of tires people are allowed to buy as well.

The California Energy Commission voted unanimously to impose new, strict "efficiency standards" for tires, based on their rolling resistance. This is an environmentalist decision pushed under the guise that it will save California drivers a few hundred dollars a year, based on the idea that tires having less rolling resistance will help Californians save on gas (which is too expensive because of California's astronomical gas tax and burdensome gas regulations).

According to tire manufacturer Goodyear, though, this will cost Californians hundreds more instead. That is because of a little-known economic concept called "supply and demand." The new rule would ban 70% of the tires sold in California by 2033, which would mean that either the tire market in California would be artificially limited or that tire manufacturers would need to dedicate their resources specifically to California-approved tires, which would not otherwise be sold in other states in large quantities.

Either the supply remains low, causing people to pay more, or manufacturers spend more to provide Californians with tires, causing people to pay more. This is exactly what California has done with gas, mandating a special California-specific gasoline blend that is more expensive to produce, and thus more expensive for California drivers.

All of this is being done under the pretense that the commission wants to reduce costs for California drivers. As commissioner Nancy Skinner said, "You think about how much gas is per gallon, and we don't see it going down." California Democrats made gas more expensive, and they don't want to do anything to actually lower those costs, so they will make you pay more for replacement tires and call it a day. It's worth noting that Skinner was also a member of the Democratic Socialists of America in the 1980s when she was on the Berkeley City Council.

The California Energy Commission has never regulated tires before, but California has never seen a prospective regulation that it doesn't adore. That is how you end up with California Democrats artificially increasing the cost of tires to address the artificially increased costs of gas brought on by the last set of regulations. The only question now is which aspect of cars California will valiantly regulate next when it becomes clear that this supposed cost-saving regulation predictably backfired.

—By Zachary Faria

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Judging Amy

Barrett defies easy categorization, to the dismay of the Left and Right

By Kimberly Ross

During her Senate confirmation hearings in October 2020, Justice Amy Coney Barrett enjoyed enthusiastic support from the Right and received harsh criticism from the Left. It was entirely expected. She was President Donald Trump's third nominee to the Supreme Court, not long before the presidential election, much to the chagrin of Democrats. Abortion-rights advocates were incensed by the selection. As a Catholic and mother of seven with privately held conservative and pro-life beliefs, Barrett represented much of what they feared. Nearly six years later, however, Barrett has confounded her share of Supreme Court observers on both sides of the political aisle.

Barrett was confirmed 52-48, continuing the trend of closely divided Supreme Court confirmation votes. The split shows once again how deeply ideological the Supreme Court confirmation process has become.

Since Barrett took her place on the high court, she has become something of an enigma. The second woman nominated to the Supreme Court by a Republican president doesn't neatly fit into the box of expectations either side had for her. For Republicans and Democrats alike, the only other example of what to expect from a female justice nominated by a Republican is Justice Sandra Day O'Connor. As years have passed, it's become apparent that the comparison to O'Connor doesn't quite work.

"Since Amy Barrett took her place on the high court, she has become something of an enigma. The second woman nominated to the Supreme Court by a Republican president doesn't neatly fit into the box of expectations either the Left or the Right had for her.

Barrett clerked for Justice Antonin Scalia. Because she openly admired his jurisprudence, many assumed she would follow a similar path on the court. When Trump nominated Barrett, she made it clear in her own statements that her judicial approach would mirror Scalia's, saying, "His judicial philosophy is mine, too. A judge must apply the law as written. Judges are not policymakers, and they must be resolute in setting aside any policy views they may hold." Barrett's approach is one of textualism and originalism. Some on the Right who may have hoped for a second Scalia era have been left disappointed. But contrary to what some have suggested, it is not due to Barrett being compromised or because she's a shiny new tool of the Democrats.

Each side praises some of Barrett's decisions while deriding others, to varying degrees. Neither side is fully comfortable with the justice who can't be easily defined.

During Barrett's confirmation hearing for the 7th Circuit Court of Appeals in September 2017, three years before she ever reached the Supreme Court, the late Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein said to her, "I think in your case, professor, when you read your speeches, the conclusion

one draws is that the dogma lives loudly within you. And that's of concern when you come to big issues that large numbers of people have fought for for years in this country." That was but one moment when the religious Right felt a fighter had been chosen to ascend to the federal bench. The devoutly Catholic Barrett was seen as a hopeful addition to the judiciary, one whose inclusion would mean a change for the better. This was a hope that would only grow once Trump nominated her to the Supreme Court three years later.

That hope was validated a month after her Senate confirmation to the Supreme Court, when Barrett demonstrated a clear ideological shift on the court in November 2020 in *Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn v. Cuomo.*

The emergency decision, right in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, dealt with attendance limits at churches and synagogues. In the 5-4 decision, Barrett joined the majority, standing opposite the liberal members on the court and Chief Justice John Roberts. The religious victory only reinforced to conservatives that the right person was chosen. Meanwhile, Democrats considered it the first proof that their fears were becoming reality.

However strong her start on the high court, the specifics of those early decisions have been largely forgotten. Republicans, Democrats, and the media didn't really start paying full attention until Barrett joined the majority in one of the defining moments in the court's history.

On Dec. 1, 2021, the justices heard oral arguments in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* concerning the constitutionality of a right to abortion. For an untold number of pro-life Americans, this case earned all their attention. The very possibility of a future without *Roe* had played a major role in securing Election Day votes for Trump. The president's direct hand in nominating Justices Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, and Barrett meant the door was held open for this kind of landmark decision. On June 24, 2022, the court issued its decision. In a 6-3 judgment, the majority upheld Mississippi's abortion ban. Roberts concurred only on the judgment. The decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* and *Casey v. Planned Parenthood* was a 5-4 split, with Justice Samuel Alito writing the majority opinion, joined by Justices Clarence Thomas, Gorsuch, Kavanaugh, and Barrett. Nearly half a century of federally guaranteed abortion was reversed overnight, and a United States without *Roe* was finally realized.

Amy Coney Barrett listens as President Donald Trump speaks prior to her swearing-in as an associate justice of the Supreme Court, Oct. 26, 2020.

PATRICK SEMANSKY / AP

Conservatives around the country rejoiced at the righting of a legal and moral wrong. For those on the Right who had been nervous about Barrett, their fears were all but put to rest. She had passed the biggest judicial test, making history as a woman and member of the court's conservative bloc. Meanwhile, Democrats felt more resolute than ever in their initial assumptions about her. In their minds, her actions as a woman had cemented a kind of gendered betrayal.

For both sides of the aisle, the premature conclusion emanated from the same starting point: Whatever Barrett does in the future, she helped to overturn *Roe* and *Casey*. For the Right, this was a massive point in her favor that could never be tarnished. For the Left, it was a sin that would never be forgotten.

For the most part, the first few terms of Barrett's tenure existed within partisan assumptions. The Right felt secure in her stability, and the Left felt security in its collective animosity. It wasn't until 2024 that staunch Republicans began to wonder aloud if Barrett was turning into more of a swing vote than had been previously anticipated.

Murthy v. Missouri, argued in March 2024 and decided that June, is one that bothered conservatives. The case centered on allegations that the Biden administration put pressure on social media companies to suppress certain types of speech. The speech in question

included conservative views such as those critical of the Biden White House, COVID-19 policies, and election matters. The underlying questions about First Amendment rights were significant, but the court did not reach them. Barrett wrote the 6-3 majority opinion. In it, she wrote that the plaintiffs did not establish the standing necessary to bring their specific claims. For those who expected the Supreme Court to address what they saw as government censorship, the decision was a disappointment. With Barrett writing the majority opinion, that frustration landed on her. However, her reasoning was not a departure from judicial philosophy but an example of it. Rather than deciding the case based on the significance of the speech involved, she focused on the legal requirements that were needed to bring the claims in the first place. What appeared to casual observers to be a departure from the norm was really an example of the judicial approach she had articulated from the beginning.

Weeks earlier, Barrett had broken from the conservative bloc for a different reason, and this time, it hit closer to home. *Fischer v. United States*, decided June 28, 2024, asked whether a federal obstruction statute could be used to charge Jan. 6, 2021, Capitol riot defendants with obstructing an official proceeding. In a 6-3 decision, Roberts wrote for the majority, joined by Thomas, Alito, Gorsuch, Kavanaugh, and, unexpectedly, Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson. They ruled that the statute only applied when the charged person "impaired the availability or integrity" of a physical document or item used in an official proceeding. Barrett dissented, joined by Justices Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan.

Arriving at the House of Representatives Chamber for a State of the Union address, President Donald Trump passes Amy Coney Barrett (second from right), along with Chief Justice John Roberts (at top) and Associate Justice Brett Kavanaugh (third from right), Feb. 24, 2026.

"In her *Fischer v. United States* dissent, Barrett used the phrase 'textual backflips' to describe what the majority was doing in avoiding the statute's plain language — exactly what one would expect from a justice who had built her entire reputation on reading the law as written.

This wasn't a minor split. The ruling didn't just affect Joseph Fischer. It had direct implications for the federal case against Trump himself. Most would have expected Barrett to welcome an outcome that worked in the former president's favor. But she did not. Instead, she used the phrase "textual backflips" to describe what the majority was doing in avoiding the statute's plain language. This was exactly what one would expect from a justice who had built her entire reputation on reading the law as written.

For conservatives still stewing over *Murthy*, *Fischer* only deepened the confusion, and in the opposite direction. But it was the same justice who had said years earlier that judges aren't policymakers, still holding to that line even when it cost her side a win.

On April 25, 2024, the court heard oral arguments in *Trump v. United States*. What is now considered a landmark decision dealt with presidential immunity from prosecution for acts committed while in office. The case itself arose from Trump's conduct in reaction to the 2020 election, including claims that it was stolen or that there was broad election interference. This naturally extended to the Capitol riot. The final decision, handed down on July 1, 2024, was a 6-3 split. The court held that a former president has absolute immunity from criminal prosecution for actions that fall within the president's exclusive constitutional authority. For other official acts, they enjoy at least presumptive immunity. There is no immunity for unofficial acts.

Roberts wrote the majority opinion for this case. Barrett wrote a separate opinion concurring in part. She agreed with the majority while carving out a very significant part of its reasoning.

"Barrett agreed with the majority 'that the Constitution prohibits Congress from criminalizing a President's exercise' of his core constitutional powers and 'closely related conduct,'" Amy Howe at SCOTUSblog reported. "But she would have courts approach the question of immunity for other official acts differently, by focusing first on whether the criminal law under which a former president is charged applies to his official acts and, if so, whether prosecuting the former president would interfere with his constitutional authority."

None of this indicates a divergence from conservatism, nor does it suggest that Barrett was compromised by peer pressure or partisanship. Instead, it pro-

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vides evidence that Barrett's jurisprudence is her own.

By 2026, the pattern had become almost impossible for the Right to ignore. This most recent Supreme Court term has only increased the questions surrounding Barrett's so-called judicial purity.

In late June, the court struck down Trump's executive order ending birthright citizenship, a case Trump cared enough about to show up for oral arguments in person that April. His attendance was a historic first. Trump's order was aimed primarily at the children of illegal immigrants, but historically, the principle of birthright citizenship had been held to be quite broad. The outcome shouldn't have shocked anyone paying close attention. Every lower court to hear the case had already rejected the order, and legal scholars across the spectrum agreed the argument ran headlong into the 14th Amendment's citizenship clause. But conservative media didn't treat it as a foregone conclusion. They treated it as a betrayal, and Barrett, once again, was the problem.

The mail-in ballot ruling a few days later was worse, because this time, Barrett wasn't just part of the majority — she wrote it. In a 5-4 decision joined by Roberts and the court's three liberal justices, Barrett held that federal law doesn't bar states from counting mail-in ballots received after Election Day. The Right didn't hold back. One prominent conservative commentator accused her of "judicial activism disguised as selective originalism," while a retired Army officer went further, calling her the worst pick among all the judges Trump had put on the bench. It was no longer just online outrage, either. Trump himself began privately complaining about Barrett to allies.

A protest in Washington, D.C., sparked by a leaked draft opinion indicating that the Supreme Court was soon to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, May 14, 2022.

"The overriding problem with Barrett isn't that she has abandoned her original judicial philosophy. What is clear is that there is a misunderstanding of what a justice does, especially in a time so infected with tribalism.

The overriding problem with Barrett isn't that she has abandoned her original judicial philosophy. It isn't that she somehow betrayed Scalia's legacy by not reproducing his record on the Supreme Court. What is clear is that there is a misunderstanding of what a justice does, especially in a time so infected with tribalism.

Barrett, as Trump's third nominee, naturally stepped into a role filled with equal amounts of distinction and pressure. In the minds of many voters, on both sides of the aisle, the Supreme Court is an extension of partisan politics. In one breath, voters can decry legislating from the bench. In the next moment, they praise that very technique when it produces an outcome they want.

As Barrett has said, judges are not policymakers. Because that is true in theory and, as we all should hope, in practice, neither side of the aisle can expect that of her. In Barrett's case, her focus on originalism and textualism produces outcomes that conservatives have celebrated. Other times, the same judicial methodology results in an outcome that frustrates them. This is hardly proof of betrayal, especially from a justice who has been clear from the start about her guiding philosophy. Perhaps, instead, it is the consequence of taking principles seriously.

Both Democrats and Republicans initially placed Barrett in a category. This was largely due to who nominated her and her part in overturning *Roe* and *Casey*. The mistake was allowing these assumptions to remain on autopilot, convinced they had her figured out for the rest of her career. Barrett has disagreed with her conservative colleagues when she believes the law requires it.

This is exactly what people should want from someone tasked with interpreting the law.

Barrett still has decades remaining on the Supreme Court. Given her history so far, questions will linger as to whether she is conservative enough. However, the real question should be whether she applies the law as written, even when doing so is politically inconvenient.

Barrett's legacy is likely to be mixed. She will certainly continue to surprise colleagues and Supreme Court observers alike going forward. But this is less about perceived failings or ideological pressures. The truth may be that onlookers of all political stripes seem to have forgotten what judicial independence is supposed to look like. ★

Kimberly Ross (@SouthernKeeks) is a contributor to the Washington Examiner's *Beltway Confidential blog and a contributing freelance columnist at the* Freemen News-Letter. *She is a mother of two and lives in the southern United States.*

Washington Examiner

The White House has decided the nation's 250th birthday is best expressed through the biggest, loudest, fastest spectacles it can assemble.

IndyCar and the President

America 250 goes to the track

By Daniel Ross Goodman

Auto racing has been a part of American culture as long as I can remember, but I never recall racing having been a part of the White House before. At least not until this summer, when on July 13, an event that was billed as a "Grand Prix Showcase" played out on the narrow strip of pavement between the West Wing and the Eisenhower Executive Office Building.

Reigning IndyCar champion Alex Palou, 2026 Indianapolis 500 winner Felix Rosenqvist, and David Malukas stood alongside Roger Penske, the team owner and businessman who bought IndyCar and the Indianapolis Motor Speedway outright in 2020; Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy; Penske Corporation President Bud Denker; Fox Sports CEO Eric Shanks; and General Motors President Mark Reuss. Malukas performed a burnout on the White House grounds after a Team Penske crew ran a pit stop drill in front of the assembled dignitaries, and Palou presented the president with a personalized racing helmet before getting a private walk-through of the Oval Office, an experience he later described as feeling like a scene out of a movie.

President Donald Trump, for his part, used the occasion to settle a debate that had been simmering in sports media for months, declaring that professional race car drivers are, in fact, athletes — a rebuttal to sports commentators such as ESPN's Stephen A. Smith, who had argued earlier this year that steering a car doesn't count as athleticism, prompting pushback from NASCAR legends Jeff Gordon and Kyle Larson. (For my money, driving a car does not make one an athlete, but driving a high-performance race car at 200 mph while staying on the track and somehow not spinning off course? To do that, one absolutely needs to be one of the best athletes in the world. Just ask Michael Jordan, Tom Brady, Rafael Nadal, and the other all-time great athletes who have recently gotten into motorsports whether they think auto racers are athletes.)

By the time this piece runs, that afternoon on West Executive Avenue will already belong to the news cycle's distant past. What matters going forward is what it was designed to advertise: a race that Duffy has called the first IndyCar event ever held in Washington and that organizers expected to draw more than 1 million spectators to the free, open-air street circuit ringing some of the most recognizable real estate in the country.

SEVEN TURNS PAST THE MONUMENTS

The Freedom 250 Grand Prix was set to unfold on a 1.7-mile, seven-turn temporary circuit that began and ended on Third

Street in front of the Capitol, swept down a 0.4-mile frontstretch along Pennsylvania Avenue framed by the Washington Monument, and threaded past the National Archives, the National Gallery of Art, and the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum before looping back. It would make it the 15th round of the 17-race 2026 NTT IndyCar Series schedule, and the cars will have run the frontstretch faster than they run almost anywhere else on the calendar. Organizers and city officials, with support from Interior Secretary Doug Burgum, predicted that more than 1 million people would watch in person, a crowd that Burgum and city officials say would produce the most extensive transpor-

tation disruption Washington has seen outside of a presidential inauguration. Concrete barriers began going in during the final week of July, and full closures along Pennsylvania, Constitution, and Independence avenues started the week of Aug. 18 and will not fully lift until the week after the race. Mayor Muriel Bowser, who leaned into the economic case for hosting it, put it plainly at a briefing this spring: Sporting events are dollars and cents as much as they are spectacle, and a race weekend built around hotel stays, restaurant bookings, and merchandise sales will register in the District of Columbia economy long after the cars have been trucked out of town.

That combination — history and horsepower, in Burgum's phrase — is precisely the branding exercise the administration has built around America's semiquincentennial. The Freedom 250 Grand Prix takes its name from Freedom 250, the public-private organization the White House set up to help execute Task Force 250, itself created by an executive order in January 2025 to plan what the order calls "a grand celebration worthy of the momentous occasion" of the country's 250th birthday. Freedom 250 was also behind June's UFC card on the South Lawn of the White House, a spectacle I wrote about in this space a couple of months ago; the Great American State Fair on the National Mall; and July Fourth fireworks on the Mall — a run of marquee sporting and cultural events staged, deliberately, on some of the most symbolically loaded ground in the country. It operates alongside, and in occasional tension with, America250, the nonpartisan commission Congress created in 2016 for the same anniversary. A few members of Congress, including Reps. Jared Huffman (D-CA) and Maxine Dexter (D-OR), have raised questions this year about Freedom 250's fundraising practices and the difficulty of tracing where its private donations originate. Those questions may have been worth keeping in view even as the cars took the green flag, if only because they're part of the same story: a White House that has decided the nation's 250th birthday is best expressed through the biggest, loudest, fastest spectacles it can assemble.

WHY RACING, AND WHY NOW

Motorsports have occupied an unusually charged place in American political culture for decades, and the Trump-IndyCar alliance did not emerge from nowhere. Trump's relationship with racing runs back through NASCAR, whose fan base has long skewed southern, working-class, and Republican. Then-NASCAR Chairman Brian France endorsed him at a 2016 rally alongside drivers Mark Martin, Ryan Newman, and Bill and Chase Elliott; Trump served as grand marshal of the Daytona 500 during his first term; and in 2024, as a candidate trying to reclaim the presidency, he flew into Charlotte Motor Speedway for the Coca-Cola 600, the first sitting or former president to attend a race there, drawing chants of "USA" from a crowd of more than 80,000. That same instinct, that racetracks reach voters who feel unheard by more conventional political and cultural institutions, runs through the calculus behind putting IndyCar on the National Mall.

It also runs through the administration's approach to the auto industry itself, which functions as both an economic constituency and a cultural one for the current Republican coalition. Over the past year, the administration has rolled back Biden-era fuel-economy and emissions standards, ended the federal electric vehicle purchase tax credit, moved to strip California of its authority to set stricter vehicle standards, and imposed sweeping tariffs on imported vehicles and auto parts — tariffs that Trump has since softened for domestic manufacturers by extending a cost-relief rebate through 2030. The administration frames all of this as a rescue of an American manufacturing base that it says had been distorted by mandates favoring EVs over the gas-powered trucks and sedans that remain the industry's biggest sellers. Critics, including clean-energy advocates and some economists, warn it could leave domestic automakers less competitive globally even as it protects them at home. Whatever one makes of that policy debate, it locates Detroit and its workforce — the same Rust Belt communities Trump has courted since his first walk through a United Auto Workers picket line's opposite number, a non-union Michigan auto-parts supplier, in 2023 — squarely inside his political coalition. A White House-blessed IndyCar race, with GM's president standing next to the president at its kickoff event, fits naturally into that alignment: It's racing as a showcase for driving talent as well as for an American automotive industry that the administration wants voters to see as ascendant again.

IndyCar itself, meanwhile, is in the middle of a genuine commercial revival that makes it a more useful partner for this kind of spectacle than it might have been a few years ago. The series moved its media rights to Fox in 2025, and coverage that season averaged 1.36 million viewers, a 27% jump from the year be-

National Guard troops cross the Washington, D.C., race track, Aug. 18, 2026.

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fore and the sport's best audience in 17 years, with especially strong growth among viewers under 35. Fox liked what it saw enough to buy a one-third stake in Penske Entertainment, the Penske-controlled company that owns IndyCar and the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, in a deal announced last summer alongside a multiyear extension of the broadcast contract. The momentum has only accelerated into 2026: This year's Indianapolis 500 drew almost 7 million viewers on Fox, continuing to build on the broadcast's strong 2025 performance. Put simply, IndyCar was arriving at the National Mall as a sport on the rise, with its network broadcast partner financially invested in making sure it keeps rising — an alignment of interests that makes a White House eager for ratings and an ownership group eager for exposure unusually well matched.

SPECTACLE AS STATECRAFT

None of this happened in isolation. The Freedom 250 Grand Prix is the latest entry in a run of marquee sporting events that this administration has folded into the semiquincentennial calendar, from the UFC card staged on the South Lawn in June to the World Cup, whose early rounds played out across the country this summer with Trump making his own imprint on the tournament through a White House task force and a phone call to FIFA's president that led to the most-discussed overturning of a red card in World Cup history. Each of these events trades on a similar premise: that sports, insofar as they are competitions that are stripped of the ambiguity that clouds so much of public life, offer a kind of clarity that a fractured media landscape increasingly struggles to provide. Fighters win or lose in the octagon, the ball either goes through the goalposts or it doesn't, drivers finish first or second or 17th — there are no murky judgment calls, no need to refer the case to outside consultants to decide which of the contestants was more meritorious. In addition to being a refreshing change of pace from the frustrating lack of clarity that we're compelled to deal with in much of the rest of our lives, the clarity and the satisfying decisiveness of sports has obvious political utility as well, and this administration has shown a consistent instinct for staging it as close to the literal seats of American power as it can arrange — on the South Lawn, on the National Mall, and down Pennsylvania Avenue itself.

Two massive grandstands underway on the National Mall, as seen from the Washington Monument, Aug. 5, 2026.

There's also something fitting, whatever one's politics, about choosing a car race to mark this particular anniversary. The automobile has been bound up with our self-conceptions as Americans for more than a century, from the assembly line that Henry Ford perfected in Michigan to the interstates the Eisenhower administration built to the drive-in culture, road-trip mythology, and Detroit manufacturing identity that followed. A sport built entirely around speed, precision engineering, and split-second decision-making under pressure maps unusually well onto the story we like to tell about ourselves: We're a nation that moves fast, builds things, and rewards whoever gets there first. Whether the Freedom 250 Grand Prix is judged to have delivered on that symbolism as cleanly as its organizers hoped depends on execution — on whether a street circuit wrapped around some of the most heavily secured real estate on Earth can actually pull off the kind of seamless, telegenic spectacle the White House promised, and on whether Washington's roughly 2 million residents will have experienced the weekend as a civic celebration or as a monthlong traffic nightmare with a race attached to it.

"The Freedom 250 Grand Prix is a showcase for driving talent as well as for an American automotive industry that the administration wants voters to see as ascendant again.

Expect the logistics to dominate local coverage: incremental street closures began in late July, a full security perimeter lockdown was scheduled to be in place by Aug. 18, and a Metro system that district officials positioned as the only realistic way in or out of downtown will have been put to the test by the roughly 1 million fans who were expected to attempt to attend and/or view the event in some form of fashion. Beyond the racing itself, the organizers built out a full weekend around the Grand Prix, including a classic-car parade, an EV showcase, and a concert series, all under the Freedom 250 banner. Roger Penske said ticket demand ran far ahead of supply, with more than 250,000 requests for roughly 100,000 daily grandstand spots.

Whatever the final verdict on its execution turns out to be, the Freedom 250 Grand Prix will say something real about how this White House has chosen to mark this particular American milestone: not primarily through pageantry borrowed from history, but through the modern spectacle of speed, sponsorship, and network television ratings, staged in the literal shadow of the monuments the anniversary is meant to honor. On Aug. 23, after the green flag dropped on Pennsylvania Avenue, the cars circling the Capitol and the Washington Monument at 190 mph raced for a trophy — but they were also racing, whether anyone driving them intends it or not, for the attention of a country that this administration has bet will keep watching as long as something is moving fast enough to hold it. ★

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Washington Examiner

Unpredictable

Kalshi and prediction markets experience explosive growth, but also new legal challenges

By Carson Becker

Prediction markets have come of age. Kalshi, the industry leader, is enjoying its biggest year ever. Monthly trading volumes surpassed $37 billion in July, boosted by the World Cup. The startup is raising new capital at a $40 billion valuation, about four times what it was worth just eight months ago, and the CEO speaks of an initial public offering as soon as 2027. With this impressive growth comes heightened risk. Looming questions concerning its regulatory status and market integrity threaten to upend Kalshi's business model, while mounting state and federal lawsuits suggest an eventual date with the Supreme Court.

Kalshi was founded in 2018 by Tarek Mansour and Luana Lopes Lara, who met at MIT and serve as CEO and chief operating officer, respectively. As undergraduates, the founders secured various Wall Street jobs and internships: Mansour worked as a derivatives analyst at Goldman Sachs, while Lopes Lara held roles at Bridgewater and Citadel. On Wall Street, the founders observed how institutional investors sought to trade such uncertain binary outcomes as Brexit and the 2016 presidential election through proxies such as swaps, options, and other risk curves. In their telling, Kalshi was established to resolve a simple question: Why not just trade on the binary outcome itself?

Kalshi's business model depends on volume and trading fees. "Kalshi doesn't care who wins or loses," a company spokesperson told me. "Every trade matches a buyer and a seller, same as matching a buy and sell order on a stock exchange." The events contracts are structured around binary yes-or-no outcomes such as "Will the Republicans win or hold the Senate in 2026?" or "Snow in New York City from Jan 24–26?" and are priced between $0 and $1, reflecting the likelihood of the underlying event. A contract with a 23% probability will thus sell for $0.23, and pay out either $1 or $0 depending on the outcome.

> **"Looming questions concerning its regulatory status and market integrity threaten to upend Kalshi's business model, while mounting state and federal lawsuits suggest an eventual date with the Supreme Court.**

Jeffrey Bandman, a former Commodity Futures Trading Commission official who led Kalshi's regulatory strategy from 2019 and has returned after a two-year hiatus, told me that the founders were determined to build the business in close cooperation with regulators. "They understood early on that taking regulation seriously could be a competitive advantage," he said.

In 2020, the CFTC, the body that oversees U.S. derivatives markets, approved Kalshi as a designated contract market, the same license category as the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, enabling it to offer events contracts nationwide. Kalshi launched its public exchange in 2021. CFTC approval subjects the business to the Commodity Exchange Act, rather than state gambling laws or the Unlawful Internet Gambling Enforcement Act, which contains an explicit carve-out for CEA-regulated products. The question at the heart of an escalating showdown with state and tribal regulators is whether some of these offerings constitute gambling.

At the moment, a duopoly of Kalshi and Polymarket controls 97.5% of the industry. While Kalshi was born in close cooperation with federal regulators, requiring know-your-customer and presenting itself more like a traditional fintech, Polymarket has taken a more libertarian approach, accepting crypto wallets in lieu of identification and handling international business from an offshore entity registered in Panama.

At left, the National Hockey League's Minnesota Wild warms up in front of a sign advertising the prediction market platform Kalshi in Chicago before a game against the Chicago Blackhawks, March 17, 2026; below, an advertisement for Kalshi hangs in downtown Washington, D.C., April 1, 2026.

Kalshi has the backing of Silicon Valley kingmakers such as Sequoia Capital and a16z, while rival Polymarket has been financed by Founders Fund and Intercontinental Exchange, the company that owns the New York Stock Exchange. Given the level of investment, it seems doubtful that the long-term play is a regulatory arbitrage on sports betting. Investors believe that prediction markets could become a massive new asset class, both a forecasting tool that aggregates dispersed knowledge and the infrastructure for a new kind of financial instrument that can price and hedge risk for retail investors and institutions alike.

Kalshi told me that roughly 75% of its site visitors come for the real-time odds and information, while a mere 25% come to trade. They recently launched a "Midterms Hub" to serve such visitors, aggregating odds, polling, news, and Federal Election Commission data into a single dashboard. Mansour often describes Kalshi's market data as "the wisdom of the crowds."

This isn't marketing hyperbole. Certain markets are followed very closely by investors, revealing expectations on things such as inflation, payrolls, and Federal Reserve interest rate decisions. In February, the Fed published a working paper titled "Kalshi and the Rise of Macro Markets," arguing that prediction markets constitute a valuable complement to existing forecast tools and describing Kalshi as "the most mature and comprehensive prediction market for economic forecasting."

These platforms are also tied to politics. Donald Trump Jr. advises both of the leading markets, and the Trump administration has generally embraced them. But the previous administration could be outright hostile. In 2024, the Biden-era FBI raided the apartment of Polymarket founder Shayne Coplan while the CFTC repeatedly attempted to constrain its expansion into new markets. After Trump returned to office, the regulator voluntarily dismissed its appeal over political events contracts and abandoned a proposed rule that would have prohibited trading on political and sporting events. Kalshi began offering sporting events contracts in January 2025, a category that now accounts for up to 90% of its trading volume. Congress, meanwhile, has not yet made any attempt to regulate them independently.

The markets themselves are determined ad hoc, ranging from politics and sporting events to economics and the weather. Kalshi has weekly brainstorming sessions to design new offerings — recent examples include those dedicated to FDA drug approvals, and one devoted to airport flight delays, which would, in theory, enable traders to "hedge" travel disruptions the same way that an orange grower might hedge against a devastating freeze by buying weather derivatives. Meanwhile, any user can submit a market request via a portal on Kalshi's website. These are then reviewed to ensure that they are legal and "not easy to manipulate."

In November 2025, the ex-investment banker Mark Moran traded on a Kalshi market titled "Who will run for public office this year?", a market in which he was listed as an outcome. He later announced a Senate run in Virginia, then traded on his own primary. In April, Kalshi suspended him for five years and fined him $6,229.30, while punishing two other candidates who had traded on their races in Texas and Minnesota. In a disciplinary filing, Kalshi wrote that Moran "qualified as a direct decision maker" for the contract and had "direct influence" over the outcome. Moran, who said he wanted to get caught, told me he plans to sue.

Moran demonstrated that, while a person can eventually be caught and disciplined for breaking Kalshi's rules, the underlying market was vulnerable to manipulation. Barring the decision maker from trading is one thing, but what about traders with money riding on that outcome? It raises the question: Why are such pliable contracts allowed to trade as derivatives in the first place?

The regulators now seem to be wondering the same. In mid-August, mention markets, in which users are able to trade on whether a specific word or phrase will be spoken aloud during a given event, were removed from Kalshi's exchange amid an active inquiry from the CFTC.

Similar cases involving Donald

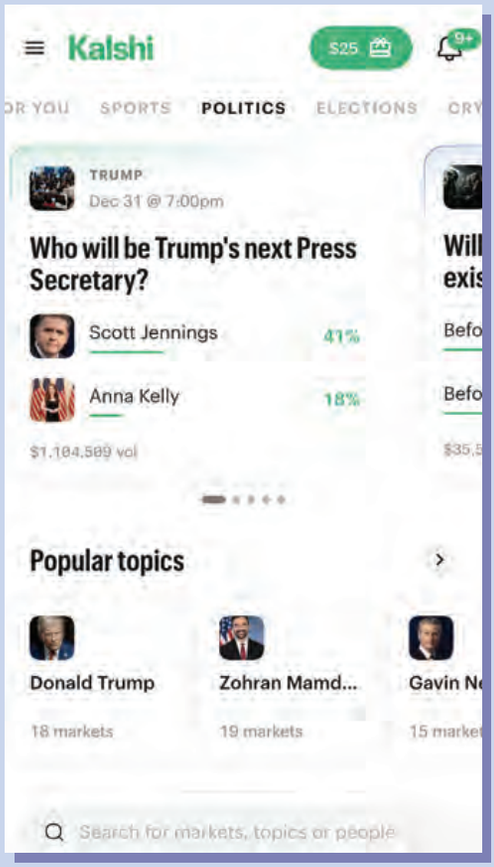
TOP, DAVID BANKS / AP; BELOW, ALLISON ROBBERT / AP

Trump's teleprompter operator and former Rep. George Santos suggest that Moran's is not an isolated incident. Given the scale of these markets, one can't help but wonder how much slips through the cracks. The CFTC's capacity for enforcement is much weaker than that of the Securities and Exchange Commission, and Kalshi told me it has just 20 in-house enforcement personnel out of about 150 total employees. In February, it claimed to have opened 200 investigations over the previous year. While they police their exchange and may refer serious cases to the CFTC and the Justice Department, it's worth asking if the rapid ascent of prediction markets has left regulators in over their heads.

While the insights derived from its markets might make Kalshi a valuable tool for investors, they seem to play a lesser role in the company's overall business model. Beyond major election cycles, political markets are similarly marginal. The real driver of Kalshi's impressive growth has been sporting events such as the World Cup.

In the 2018 case *Murphy v. NCAA*, the Supreme Court struck down the Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act of 1992, which prohibited states from authorizing or licensing sports betting except in special grandfathered cases such as Nevada. The ruling did not, however, contemplate federally regulated exchanges trading on the same outcomes. In Justice Samuel Alito's majority opinion, he summed it up: "Congress can regulate sports gambling directly, but if it elects not to do so, each State is free to act on its own."

POLITICS ON KALSHI



The Politics category on Kalshi's homepage, showing a wide range of markets, including subcategories dedicated to Donald Trump, Zohran Mamdani, and Gavin Newsom.

Scott Jennings
Kalshi keeps markets fair
Insider trading is prohibited on Kalshi, do not trade if you have insider information on this market.
More details

During a trade attempt on the market 'Who will be Trump's next Press Secretary?' a notification appears, warning that those with insider information are not permitted to trade.

"Kalshi has always maintained that it is not a gambling entity, an opinion shared by the CFTC but widely rejected by the states. To the surprise of no one, the gambling industry is among Kalshi's more vocal critics.

Kalshi has always maintained that it is not a gambling entity, an opinion shared by the CFTC but widely rejected by the states. To the surprise of no one, the gambling industry is among Kalshi's more vocal critics. DraftKings and FanDuel each represent about a third of the regulated sports betting market that emerged post-2018, with Fanatics and various casino brands splitting most of the remainder. Matt Kalish, the cofounder of DraftKings, believes that Kalshi's early success is due to regulatory arbitrage, offering sports markets in 12 states where sportsbooks cannot operate, including Texas and California.

"Kalshi can LARP as a finance company all they want," Kalish told me. "Ninety percent of its volume is sports betting, and much of that is coming from markets where sports betting is not authorized. The second that they lose sports markets, Kalshi is irrelevant. It's their entire business."

Such criticisms have not prevented the sportsbooks from adopting the same model, however. Since December 2025, DraftKings has operated a CFTC-regulated prediction market of its own, with FanDuel following suit in a joint venture with CME Group.

Chris Colombo, a veteran bookmaker and the son of slain mob boss Joe Colombo, believes that sports prediction markets closely resemble his old line of work. In 2008, a federal judge sentenced him to a year and a day in prison after he pleaded guilty to running an illegal gambling ring in New York. "It's gambling, plain and simple," Colombo told me. "I don't have a problem with it. But promoting it the way they do is unacceptable."

This year, concerns about sovereignty and lost tax revenue have led to a number of state suits. Minnesota introduced legis-

According to the Kalshi market, there's a 47% chance that the Democrats will win both the House and the Senate in the midterm elections.

Currently, Kalshi users see a 39% chance that the Democrats win the House and the GOP holds the Senate. If that is the result in November, a $10 position taken now on 'Yes' on the 'D-House, R-Senate' contract will earn $24.59.

lation making it a felony to operate or create a prediction market, only for a federal judge to block enforcement days before it took effect. Nevada won an injunction barring Kalshi from sports, political, and entertainment contracts. After an investigator from the Nevada Gaming Control Board kept trading after it had been prohibited in-state, the board threatened Kalshi with $120,000 daily penalties for failing to implement a geofence by Aug. 12. The board has since argued that Kalshi missed the deadline and is pursuing its claim in state court. A similar geofencing deadline in Washington looms on Sept. 2.

In late July, New York Attorney General Letitia James sued Kalshi, seeking $36 billion in penalties, more than its current valuation. "Prediction markets like Kalshi are gambling platforms," James said. Massachusetts, Michigan, Wisconsin, and other states have filed similar suits, with Arizona Attorney General Kris Mayes even going so far as to press criminal charges. Several tribes have also sued, citing the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act. Meanwhile, 44 state attorneys general sent a letter to the CFTC, arguing that it has no authority over sports prediction markets. The CFTC has stepped in to defend its jurisdiction, issuing a directive on Aug. 11 ordering Kalshi to ignore a temporary restraining order sought by New York, ostensibly to "maintain orderly trading."

This pushback foreshadows a confrontation with major implications for the future of both Kalshi and the CFTC. Prediction market cases are pending in eight of the 13 federal appeals courts and could reach 10 by the end of the year. It seems only a matter of time before one of these reaches the Supreme Court, where a decisive ruling on CFTC preemption could either prove to be a serious problem or a godsend for Kalshi.

In April, the 3rd Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in favor of Kalshi and the CFTC after Kalshi sued New Jersey's gambling regulator over a cease-and-desist order. The decision upheld that Kalshi's sporting events contracts are "swaps" and are not subject to state oversight.

"The Supreme Court will have several cases to choose from," said Daniel Wallach, a gaming attorney and lecturer at the University of Miami Law School. "It's either going to be the New Jersey case right out of the gate, or the next federal appeals court decision which is in conflict with the 3rd Circuit's ruling."

Such a Supreme Court ruling will not happen overnight. "It is possible that the Supreme Court could grant cert as early as this December, schedule it for oral argument in the spring, and potentially have a ruling by June 2027," Wallach told me. But it could easily slip into 2028.

In a recent interview, Mansour brushed off the growing litigation against Kalshi, comparing it to the early days of Uber, when bitter incumbents used everything at their disposal to halt the disruptor. "Monopolies use the legal system to thwart competition," said Bradley Tusk, who ran Uber's regulatory campaigns during its early expansion and whose consulting firm also advises Kalshi. "Here, the state is the monopoly. They're upset that they don't derive the tax revenue from prediction markets and can't tell them what to do."

Apart from a direct intervention from Congress, which seems a bit more likely if the Democrats sweep the midterm elections, or a change of heart at the CFTC, which seems unthinkable until 2029, a Supreme Court ruling seems to be the only way this standoff gets resolved. If the Supreme Court were to decide that the CFTC is not the proper regulator, then the states have the upper hand. "All of the state litigation is designed to prod the Court to take up the case," Tusk said.

Kalshi seems to be racing the clock to grow large enough, fast enough that tearing down the edifice becomes unthinkable. But to justify ever-higher valuations, prediction markets must deliver on their promise to become permanent. For now, this is not certain. With $40 billion on the line, Kalshi's investors will either own the infrastructure of a revolutionary new asset class or a betting exchange of contested legality, a binary outcome in its own right. ★

Carson Becker is an American writer.

Washington Examiner

Define the

Two professional basketball veterans challenge the WNBA to decide who is a woman

By Nicole Russell

The Christian apologist G.K. Chesterton once said, "A man is angry at a libel because it is false, but at a satire because it is true."

Chesterton died in 1936, but might as well have been referring to today's ongoing debate around whether or not biological males can or should play in women's sports.

Earlier this month, two former NBA players, Enes Kanter Freedom and Royce White, declared themselves eligible for the WNBA draft after saying they now identify as women. Freedom now says he's talked to even more ex-NBA players who are ready to join. This follows Indiana Fever guard Sophie Cunningham's comments in a July ESPN interview that biological men should not compete in women's sports or access women's locker rooms.

The Left has said Freedom and White's motives are insincere and a political stunt. Conservatives, on the other hand, have largely praised the men for taking on the sports league, hoping it will expose vague self-identification rules in women's sports, perhaps once and for all.

The news has created a firestorm, to say the least.

But the juxtaposition raises an interesting question: If this is a stunt, why is it harmful? After years of watching males permeate female spaces, from locker rooms and shelters to track meets and bathrooms, the answer is a loaded one. By forcing the WNBA's hand, White and Freedom may succeed in being able to

WASHINGTON EXAMINER ILLUSTRATION

underscore, in a unique way, the point conservatives have been trying to make with legislation, rallies, and think pieces for years.

Already, White and Freedom's announcement has pushed the WNBA outside its comfort zone.

On Aug. 12, the WNBA convened a task force to discuss transgender athletes in the league. But as of this writing, it was unable to determine eligibility rules.

"Today's meeting covered a wide range of topics, including ongoing discussions on transgender athletes and the continued hate and vitriol directed at players online," the league said in a statement via a spokesperson. "There are no immediate eligibility matters affecting the WNBA, and we strongly denounce the bad-faith efforts to use these topics to demean or marginalize others."

After Freedom announced his intentions, White did the same.

"I'm transgender. I'm a woman," White told Fox News Digital. "I identify as sometimes identifying as a woman for [the] purpose of basketball, professional basketball, so I'll be declaring for the WNBA draft in 2027 as well."

White told the outlet he is pushing the league toward clarity. "I think the WNBA could come out and make a definitive statement about guys with a pair of balls playing in the Women's Association," he said, even claiming he might even sue for discrimination if they don't let him play.

White has leaned into the stunt on social media. After liberal influencer Ed Krassenstein posted on X that "Real men don't play women's sports," he responded, "You misgendered me again. That's toxic heteronormative bigotry... We've moved on from that way of thinking about womanhood. Why are you so pressed? We only make up a tiny percentage of the population. You're obsessed, you must be jealous of STRONG beautiful Black kweeeens!"

Responses to White and Freedom's WNBA bid have varied. "NBA vets trolling their way into the WNBA are doing more to defend women than the WNBA's self-proclaimed feminists ever did," publicist Jillian Anderston posted on X.

"How do they know they're bad faith? How are they identifying the bad faith? How dare they?" conservative commentator Ben Shapiro said on his YouTube channel, pointing out yet more irony. "How dare they suggest that Enes Kanter is somehow bad faith when he says he wants to play in the WNBA? How do they know that? Can they get inside his head? I mean, are they saying that he's not a woman? Is that what they're saying right now? And if so, how do they know?"

Left, Royce White of the Dallas Power on July 24, 2022, in Frisco, Texas; right, Enes Kanter Freedom of the Boston Celtics, Aug. 11, 2020.

COOPER NEILL/GETTY IMAGES FOR BIG3; MIKE EHRMANN/GETTY IMAGES

But former ESPN analyst Ryan Clark slammed Freedom and White for making a mockery of women's basketball, calling them "clowns."

"If we are men, and as former athletes, and we understand how hard it is to get respect in the game, don't make a mockery about what these women are going through. Don't make jokes about things you'll never understand," Clark said in a video on his podcast, *The Pivot*.

Some caution is in order about embracing the two veteran male players as poster children for the cause.

White has been active in Minnesota politics, and his stunt was well-timed. He ran for election to the U.S. Senate to represent Minnesota and lost in the Republican primary on Aug. 11. Court records show that in April, a judge ruled he was under a no-contact order for making threats of and being physically abusive toward his ex-partner and their son. White disputed the claims and is appealing the findings.

Freedom, who played 11 seasons in the NBA, is known as a political dissident and for being vocal about human rights abuses. Both men have obviously evolved into political activism, and neither man has ever, at least publicly, before considered himself transgender or struggled with gender dysphoria. This is an important point to those on the Left who are either indifferent to or annoyed with the ex-NBA players' sudden interest in the WNBA.

At the same time, there have been real consequences to young women as a result of policies that have allowed biological males to compete. Take Connecticut, whose Interscholastic Athletic Conference allows students to participate in high school sports using their stated gender identity. Self-identification is enough. If authenticity is weighed, it's unclear how.

The WNBA supports this, too. In June 2021, the WNBA posted on X about their support of Andraya Yearwood and Terry Miller. "We see you. We support you and all of the other trans athletes just trying to compete in the sports they love," it reads.

But Yearwood and Miller are no ordinary athletes. They're the male athletes who competed against females like Selina Soule, Alanna Smith, and Chelsea Mitchell in Connecticut in high school a few years ago, consistently besting girls and snatching over 15 women's state championships. In 2019, the girls sued — the case is ongoing.

On behalf of the women and girls who have lost races to biological males and

thus been robbed of scholarship opportunities, titles, championships, and other victories, the WNBA owes the females of this country an explanation: What really does the "W" in WNBA stand for anyway? It shouldn't be that hard to define. Their silence, as the kids say, is deafening.

In 2021, the WNBA had no problem giving its support to transgender high school athletes, even though they were winning titles over young women. Yet now, the WNBA is not only reluctant to respond to Kanter and White's proposition but seems hostile to it. In an Aug. 7 statement, the WNBA said, "We embrace justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. Hate, abuse, and demonization of any person or group of people, including transgender people, only fuel fear, division, and harm. We will continue to have hard conversations. But we will not be used as political pawns."

The WNBA may wish not to be used as a political pawn, but that commitment hasn't kept it from happening regardless. The stunt, the satire, seems cruel to them because it is exposing an even more incisive truth that two-thirds of Americans agree on, according to Gallup: Transgender athletes should only be allowed to play on sports teams that match their sex at birth.

"What really does the "W" in WNBA stand for anyway? It shouldn't be that hard to define. Their silence, as the kids say, is deafening.

It is and always was cruel to allow biological males to compete against females in sports. For years, the Left — with the help of state policies and sports leagues — could see the obvious physiological differences males enjoy and opted instead to let them err on the side of self-identification, crushing women's rights and opportunities.

The problem with having a problem with the stunt, or with being used as a political pawn, is that either way the WNBA is now forced to address the dichotomy of the progressive's view on transgender sports: Either White and Kanter can play because they identify as women against women, or they must define "woman" more broadly than self-identification alone, erasing years of standing firm on this worldview.

In refusing to reach a conclusion about their eligibility rules, the WNBA might believe it is embracing inclusion and rejecting bigotry, but the league is actually betraying the girls and women, as well as the Title IX protections that make the league possible.

The irony that this may be illustrated by a stunt by two former NBA players, done in jest to prove a point, doesn't make the conclusion any less powerful or poignant for the women affected. As the comedian Joan Rivers once said, "Comedy is truth. We should not apologize for it." ★

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WHAT'S REALLY HAPPENING ON THE USS ABRAHAM LINCOLN?

The *USS Abraham Lincoln* conducts blockade operations related to the Strait of Hormuz in the Arabian Sea on April 16.

HANDOUT PHOTO BY THE U.S. NAVY VIA GETTY IMAGES; AARON SCHWARTZ / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

It's more complicated than partisan politics

By Mackubin Owens

Recent headlines have been dominated by the travails aboard the *USS Abraham Lincoln* (CVN-72), a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier deployed to the Middle East in support of U.S. actions against Iran.

Senate Democrats recently sent a letter to Secretary of War Pete Hegseth demanding information about "mounting evidence that conditions aboard the carrier have deteriorated to the point that the safety and wellbeing of its crew could be compromised." According to the letter, family members have received messages about food and water shortages, broken plumbing, exhaustion, and mental health issues serious enough that sailors have attempted to jump overboard. "These are deeply troubling reports, and the American people deserve honest answers," the letter reads.

War Secretary Pete Hegseth

In response to the news reports and congressional action, the Commander of U.S. Central Command, Adm. Brad Cooper, visited the ship and acknowledged the difficulty of the deployment. He also praised the crew for its performance and resiliency. As the congressional letter observes, the American people do indeed deserve honest answers. Unfortunately, the affair has become mired in partisan politics.

What are the basic facts of the case? The *Lincoln* has been deployed for an extended period, well beyond the planned time at sea. But long naval deployments are nothing new. The *Lincoln* has been operating at a very high tempo, which places a great deal of pressure on the operators. Launching and recovering aircraft during normal operations is stressful. That stress is multiplied when these actions are under combat conditions. At least one sailor has reportedly attempted suicide, raising potential mental health issues. The delivery of rations via "underway replenishment" (UNREP)

has been adversely affected by damage to U.S. bases in Bahrain. But sensationalized media coverage of the affair has exaggerated the situation and has been a disservice to the sailors and Marines of the *Lincoln*.

It seems clear that reactions to the stories about the *Lincoln* reflect partisan tropes, indeed cliches, blaming conditions on preferred villains: Sailors are being "victimized" by President Donald Trump's unnecessary war, or today's youth are "soft," a bunch of whiny crybabies. But the situation with the *Lincoln* is complex: What is happening results from a confluence of factors: high-tempo combat operations, partisan politics, the ubiquity of social media, and widespread ignorance about military affairs on the part of the American people. Context matters. Here are some of the arguments being made.

What is happening with the *Lincoln* results from a confluence of factors: high-tempo combat operations, partisan politics, the ubiquity of social media, and widespread ignorance about military affairs on the part of the American people.

TRUMP'S WAR

Reasonable people can debate the necessity for military action against Iran, but it is undeniable that we have been at war with Iran since 1979. It is also the case that every American president since that time has declared his opposition to Iran's possession of nuclear weapons. But none have acted on this principle until Trump.

The conduct of the war is certainly subject to criticism: the failure to clearly delineate objectives, the start-stop-restart character of the conflict, and contradictory public statements by the president himself, especially on social media. But the president has the constitutional authority to execute military action. Congress has the "power of the purse" to constrain him.

"One troubling, indeed reprehensible, response to the *Lincoln* affair is to treat those aboard as "victims" of Trump's war and Hegseth's incompetence. This trope is a throwback to Vietnam, when it became fashionable to claim that veterans of the war were victims.

SAILORS AS 'VICTIMS'

One troubling, indeed reprehensible, response to the *Lincoln* affair is to treat those aboard as "victims" of Trump's war and Hegseth's incompetence. This trope is a throwback to Vietnam, when it became fashionable to claim that veterans of the war were victims.

It has been my experience that the number of veterans from that war who accept that claim is very low. I addressed this issue over two decades ago in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal* ("Vietnam Veterans Aren't Victims," July 13, 2000). Vietnam veterans to this day may disagree among themselves regarding the wisdom of the war and how it was conducted, they may harbor resentment against the policymakers who directed it, but polls and studies indicate that the vast majority are proud of their service during that conflict.

I think if we were to poll those aboard the *Lincoln*, the results would be the same. The vast majority of those embarked on the aircraft carrier are executing their duties effectively and efficiently. Indeed, the reenlistment rate aboard the *Lincoln* is among the highest in the Navy. Of course, every military organization has its share of malingerers and crybabies, and this, along with the proliferation of social media and the predisposition of news organizations to believe the worst about the Trump administration, has magnified the normal friction associated with military operations, transforming it into an unprecedented catastrophe.

THE ALLEGED 'SOFTNESS' OF TODAY'S YOUTH

Another theme in *Lincoln* affair is the issue of the "softness" of today's youth. This, of course, is a variation on a theme as old as war itself: The older generations *always* had it harder than the most recent one. In many respects, this is true. My dad, a Marine in World War II, had it harder than I did as a Marine in Vietnam. For instance, during the Vietnam War, the system of medical care — relatively quick evacuation to lifesaving medical facilities — substantially reduced the fatality rate associated with battlefield wounds, compared to World War II. It's even better now.

But the claim that today's sailors are less committed to the service than the "old salts" is unfair to the former. Indeed, it is a slander. The sad part of this claim is that it is all too often leveled by veterans.

TIME AT SEA AND PORT CALLS

As noted, the *Abraham Lincoln* has been deployed well past its originally planned time at sea. Long stretches without shore liberty clearly affect morale, especially during high-tempo operations. But such extensions are nothing new. And the fact is that port calls depend on operational

GRAPHIC SOURCE: CENTCOM; INSS

EA-18G Growler, attached to Electronic Attack Squadron (VAQ) 133, prepares to launch from the flight deck of the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln in support of Operation Epic Fury in the Mediterranean Sea on March 2.

GRAPHIC: YASIN DEMIRCI/ANADOLU VIA GETTY IMAGES; PHOTO BY U.S. NAVY VIA GETTY IMAGES

necessity. An important consideration is a vessel's vulnerability in port. A carrier battle group at sea depends on layered defense and surveillance provided by the carrier escorts (cruisers and destroyers) and the ability of the battle group to maneuver. What constitutes a safe port in time of war is determined by operational considerations. Sometimes, the safest place for a ship is at sea.

SHIPBOARD CONDITIONS

A nuclear-powered vessel is an amazing development in maritime history. Ironically, it is nuclear propulsion that has made its long deployment possible. In the age of sail, a ship could go where the wind took it, but of course, it had to go to port to replenish food and other necessary provisions. As sailing ships gave way to coal, vessels depended on coaling stations ashore. The shift from coal to oil changed requirements again. During World War II, the U.S. Navy was able to refuel using fleet oilers, but again, the range of a ship was limited by logistical circumstances. Such limits don't exist for nuclear-powered ships. In addition, the U.S. Navy long ago perfected "underway replenishment," enabling the resupply of combatants without returning to port.

A nuclear carrier is a floating city, populated by about 5,000 sailors and Marines. On the one hand, vessels like the *Lincoln* provide morale, welfare, and recreation amenities that were unknown in the past and usually not available today on smaller vessels. On the other hand, naval vessels are not cruise ships. Salt water is the enemy of steel. Corrosion is a constant. Maintenance is the responsibility of the crew, whether it involves the propulsion system, living spaces, or aircraft launching equipment. And when underway, replenishment is interrupted, embarked personnel make do with less desirable rations, i.e., dry goods.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND IRANIAN INFORMATION OPERATIONS

A prominent feature of conflict today is the ubiquity of social media, which not only can adversely affect operational security but also contribute to the dissemination of propaganda. This is especially concerning in an age of artificial intelligence. AI-generated stories about the *Lincoln* on social media, including "deep fake" manipulation of images, have become routine. It is increasingly difficult for people to discern between truth and falsehood. There are indications that Iran has employed AI manipulation of social media in an attempt to shape American public opinion.

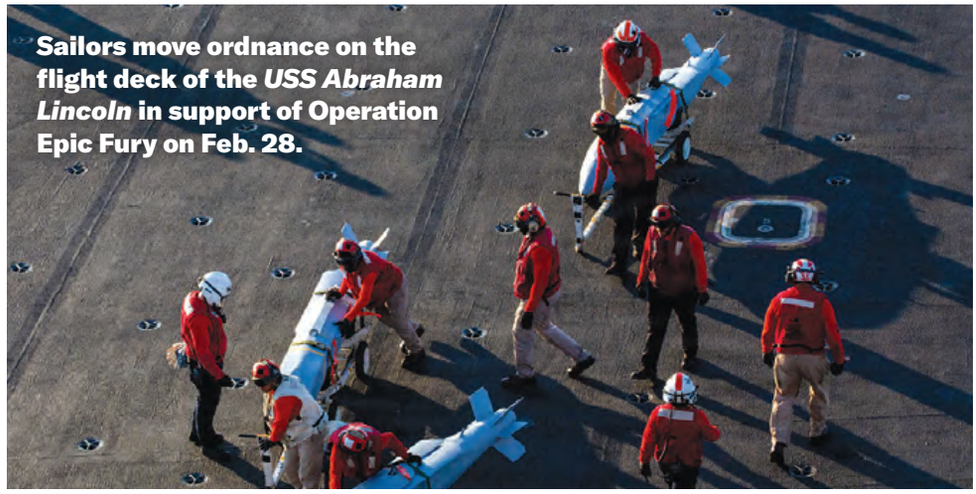
Writing in the *Middle East Insider* on Aug. 17 ("Tehran's War on American Morale"), Gregg Roman provides an example:

Mehr News, a wire service of the Islamic Republic, reported a violent clash aboard USS Abraham Lincoln: seven dead, several wounded, an adviser to the CENTCOM commander booed and pelted with water bottles on the deck of America's flagship in the Arabian Sea. The source was Tasnim, an outlet tied to the Revolutionary Guard, citing one anonymous "informed military source."

"No U.S. sailors died. That's not the point. The point is that a state at war with the United States manufactured their deaths, on a schedule, for an audience, and most of Washington still discusses it as a media story. It is not a media story. It is a military operation aimed at the one American system Tehran can actually reach: the will of the force, and the families behind it."

Of course, information warfare is not new. Russia and China used it against the United States during the Cold War. The North Vietnamese used it against us as well. We have employed it in the past against our enemies. I trust we are doing so now against Iran.

A republic requires its citizens to be able to separate truth from falsehood, so Americans need to be cognizant of the Iranian weaponization of stories like the *Abraham Lincoln* as an information operation. Its main purpose is to deepen the fissures that already afflict American politics.



Sailors move ordnance on the flight deck of the *USS Abraham Lincoln* in support of Operation Epic Fury on Feb. 28.

Service at sea is difficult, even during routine peacetime deployments. Sea duty exerts a tremendous toll on sailors. Carrier operations are particularly high-risk and unforgiving. The sailors and Marines of the *Lincoln* are carrying a heavy burden, but they are far from breaking. While we must acknowledge the very real burden, we must avoid overreacting.

As Admiral Cooper noted, the *Lincoln* strike group has been involved in the most sustained naval combat since World War II. The ships' crews have performed outstandingly, displaying great courage and resilience. As Thucydides teaches us, war is a stern master. But as the Marines like to say, it is the fighting man's duty to "embrace the suck." The *Lincoln* deserves better than to be used as a pawn in partisan politics. ★

Dr. Mackubin Owens is a retired Marine and former Naval War College professor.

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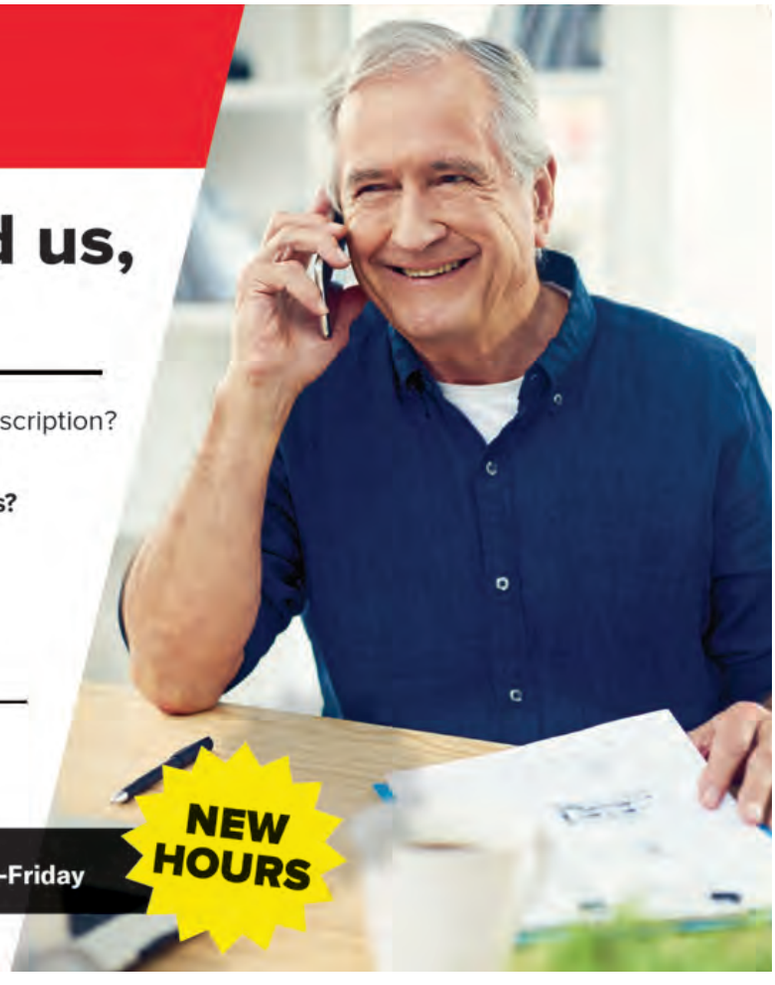

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Washington Briefing

CONGRESS

Blue wave depth will be tested in a GOP-friendly Virginia House district

EXAMINER ILLUSTRATION; MOLLY RILEY/AP; BILL CLARK/CQ ROLL CALL VIA NEWSCOM

A former Democratic congressman is challenging the Republican incumbent in the Charlottesville-to-North Carolina state line constituency

By Barnini Chakraborty

If Democrats are headed for a significant wave in November, one of the best places to measure its size may be a congressional district that, on paper, should be safely Republican.

Virginia's 5th Congressional District stretches from the academic milieu of Charlottesville into some of the state's most conservative communities, creating a stark political divide in a constituency stretching down Virginia's spine from the University of Virginia's hometown to the North Carolina state line. President Donald Trump carried the district by roughly 12 points in 2024, even as he lost Virginia to Democratic rival Kamala Harris 52% to 46%. While Republican Winsome Earle-Sears defeated now-Gov. Abigail Spanberger (D) there 53.5% to 46.3% in the 2025 governor's race — despite getting clobbered statewide against the former Democratic congresswoman 58% to 42%.

Yet Democrats are making a serious

run at the seat.

Former Rep. Tom Perriello, 51, who narrowly won the district in 2008, when the Yale and Yale Law School graduate received significant national attention as a wunderkind candidate. Before losing reelection two years later.

Now he is challenging Rep. John McGuire (R-VA). McGuire, 58, won the seat in 2024 after beating a Republican incumbent in the primary. McGuire is a former Navy SEAL who spent seven years in the state Legislature.

McGuire attended Stop the Steal rallies throughout Virginia in 2020. He has claimed the COVID-19 pandemic was a "plan-demic" designed to change voting laws and rig the 2020 presidential election, which Trump lost. McGuire admitted to attending Trump's Jan. 6, 2021, rally in Washington, D.C., but has denied participating in the subsequent attack on the Capitol Building.

In the House, McGuire has largely been a MAGA loyalist. On July 9, he introduced the Birthright Citizenship Clarification Act, which would put into law a Trump executive order the Supreme Court had recently struck down.

Perriello, since losing reelection in 2010 amid the Republican wave that effectively ended President Barack Obama's legislative agenda after two years, has held a variety of roles in the public and private sectors. He was a State Department official in Obama's second term. Perriello then ran unsuccessfully for the 2017 Democratic gubernatorial nomination.

For over four years, until July 2023, Perriello was the executive director for U.S. Programs at the Open Society Foundations, a George Soros-founded group. On Feb. 26, 2024, during what would turn out to be the final year of President Joe Biden's single term, Perriello was appointed special envoy for Sudan. He resigned on Jan. 18, 2025, just before Trump took office for his second, nonconsecutive term.

Now, Perriello's path back to Congress runs through Charlottesville and other Democratic-leaning communities, where he will need overwhelming margins while keeping Republican advantages in rural Southside from becoming insurmountable.

He has hired Del. Lily Franklin (D-VA) as his campaign manager, bringing a Southwest Virginia connection to a campaign seeking to rebuild the coalition that first carried Perriello to D.C.

The race is less a conventional battleground than a test of the national political environment and will shed light on how much the political landscape would have to change for a Democrat to win there. Democrats need to net three House seats in the 435-member chamber to claim their first House majority in four years.

Perriello believes part of the answer lies with voters who have become less attached to either party.

"People who had thought they belonged to the red team or the blue team for some time ... are looking at the landscape and wondering whether they have a team at all," Perriello told the *Washington Examiner*.

He describes the district he won in 2008 as a "July 4th popsicle," with Charlottesville at the top, more competitive territory in the middle, and deep economic and political disaffection in the southern end.

Today, he said, the district looks more like "shattered glass," with counties containing a mix of voters increasingly skeptical of being told they belong to one political team or another.

Perriello is also trying to make the campaign about issues that cut across partisan lines, particularly healthcare and the cost of living. He points to rural healthcare as an example, arguing that hospital and maternity ward closures affect voters regardless of their politics.

> **People who had thought they belonged to the red team or the blue team for some time ... are looking at the landscape and wondering whether they have a team at all.**
>
> *–Former Rep. Tom Perriello*

"People care about their families more than they care about their party affiliation," Perriello said.

McGuire's campaign didn't respond to an interview request.

A DIFFERENT DISTRICT THAN THE ONE PERRIELLO WON

Perriello's 2008 victory was itself a political oddity. Barack Obama's White House victory made him the first Democratic presidential candidate to carry Virginia since 1964, starting a winning streak that has continued through the most recent national race, in 2024, and shows no signs of abating. But the 5th remained considerably more Republican than the state as a whole. Perriello in 2008 won by less than a percentage point over an incumbent Republican.

The district has since undergone a deeper partisan realignment.

Charlottesville has become more Democratic, while many rural areas have moved sharply toward Republicans. Kyle Kondik, managing editor of Sabato's Crystal Ball at the University of Virginia Center for Politics, told the *Washington Examiner* that under the district lines in place in 2008, Republican presidential nominee John McCain carried the seat by about 3 points. Even as the late Arizona senator lost nationally by roughly 7.

In 2024, Trump performed about 10 points better in the district than he did nationally. That makes Perriello's challenge different from simply recreating his old campaign, which occurred when Facebook and X (then Twitter) were in their infancy as campaign technologies, and when Trump was in the first half of his 15-season stint hosting "The Apprentice."

Perriello has to run up the score in Charlottesville while finding voters elsewhere willing to split from increasingly nationalized partisan identities.

Perriello points to the 100 hours of town halls he held during his first congressional campaign as evidence that he knows how to compete in communities where Democrats have struggled. He also acknowledged the work required to rebuild Democratic support among

black voters in smaller communities such as Danville and Lynchburg.

"There is a lot of work to be done there," Perriello said.

Republicans argue that the Democratic case is overstated.

"Democrats are living in fantasy land if they think they can compete in VA-05, a district President Trump carried by double digits," Emma Hall, an RNC spokeswoman, told the *Washington Examiner*. "Democrats' 'blue wave' is imaginary, just like their war chest."

Henry Olsen of the Ethics and Public Policy Center likewise said he would be surprised if Perriello made the race genuinely competitive.

"I would expect the margin to be larger than four to six points," Olsen said.

CAN THE NATIONAL MOVEMENT OVERCOME THE MAP?

Democrats, however, point to recent special elections as evidence that the national environment could be strong enough to overcome the district's Republican advantage.

Political expert Andrew Koneschusky noted that Democrats have recently outperformed Trump's 2024 margins by double digits in several Republican-leaning districts.

"Democrats can absolutely overcome a 12-point deficit," Koneschusky told the *Washington Examiner*. "They've already done it multiple times in recent special elections."

Koneschusky, founder & CEO of Beltway Advisors, a public affairs and crisis communications firm, who was previously a Capitol Hill press secretary and executive director of the Louisiana Democratic Party, said a 12- to 15-point Democratic overperformance in Virginia's 5th would have implications far beyond the district, potentially putting dozens of Republican-held seats into play.

Democrats also see a broader opportunity in Virginia: The state has trended Democratic for two decades. In addition to carrying Virginia in every presidential election since Obama first flipped it, Democrats swept the three statewide offices and gained 13 seats in 2025 in the House of Delegates.

But Virginia's statewide trajectory does not necessarily make the 5th competitive.

Kondik said a Perriello victory would be highly unusual.

"It would be out of character for this district," Kondik said. "Republicans usually carry this district by comfortable, if not landslide, margins."

He said a Perriello victory would likely indicate a Democratic wave large enough to produce a House majority comparable to — or larger than — the 235 seats Democrats won in 2018.

Still, Kondik cautioned against treating one congressional race as a perfect national barometer. A close race could occur even in an otherwise disappointing Democratic election, just as Perriello's 2008 victory was an outlier.

THE MATH OF A REPUBLICAN STRONGHOLD

The district's geography gives Perriello little room for error.

"The thing I'd watch isn't whether rural Virginia suddenly turns blue; it won't," Democratic strategist Jay Satterfield told the *Washington Examiner*. "It's whether Democrats can shave enough off those Republican margins while generating huge turnout and margins in their strongholds."

Perriello, therefore, does not necessarily need to turn deep-red southside Virginia blue. He needs to lose by less.

> **"The thing I'd watch isn't whether rural Virginia suddenly turns blue; it won't. It's whether Democrats can shave enough off those Republican margins while generating huge turnout and margins in their strongholds.**
>
> *–Democratic strategist Jay Satterfield*

A Republican county won by 35 points instead of 45 can matter almost as much as adding votes in Charlottesville.

That is where Perriello's history in the district could matter. He is not a generic Democratic challenger parachuting into a Republican seat. He is a former congressman who has already won it, and he is attempting to convince voters that the political coalition that carried him to Washington nearly two decades ago can still be assembled.

The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee is betting on him, calling Perriello a "top-tier candidate" who has put the seat "squarely in play."

McGuire, meanwhile, must demonstrate that Trump's strength in the district translates to a midterm electorate and a congressional race centered on his own record.

A TEST OF THE 2026 MAP

Kondik points to other Virginia races as a useful measuring stick.

His outfit's Crystal Ball rates suburban Hampton Roads 2nd Congressional District a toss-up. While the 1st, covering the western Chesapeake Bay and suburbs north and west of Richmond, is considered lean Republican. The 5th is deemed likely Republican.

"VA-2, a classic swing seat, is the kind of seat that Democrats should flip if they are winning the House," Kondik said. "And if Democrats were to flip VA-5, it would likely be as part of a significantly big wave."

That puts the 5th in an unusual category.

Democrats do not necessarily need to win it to have a successful night. But the closer Perriello gets, the more the race could reveal about the reach of the national political environment.

A double-digit Republican victory would reinforce the district's long-standing partisan character. A narrow loss would show Democrats have made substantial progress in territory that has moved sharply toward Republicans. ★

Barnini Chakraborty (@Barnini) is a senior political reporter at the Washington Examiner.

WHITE HOUSE

Scharf edge for the Trump administration

New White House counsel would guide response to Democratic congressional investigations if fall elections go sour for GOP

By Naomi Lim

Will Scharf will be recognizable to anyone who has watched President Donald Trump issue an executive order. Scharf is the man who explains Trump's directives before they are emblazoned with the president's signature.

ALEX BRANDON/AP

President Donald Trump is changing the guard in the Office of White House Counsel before Democrats potentially regain control of Congress with a loyalist who once served as his lawyer in an election obstruction case.

Trump recently announced that Will Scharf will start as White House counsel on Sept. 1. Trump pointed to Scharf's "amazing job" as White House staff secretary and National Capital Planning Commission chairman, as well as his representation of him in his federal election obstruction case.

Scharf, 40, will be recognizable to anyone who has watched Trump issue an executive order. Scharf is the man who explains Trump's directives before they are emblazoned with the president's signature.

Scharf unsuccessfully ran for Missouri attorney general in 2024 as a Republican. A former policy director for disgraced ex-Missouri Gov. Eric Greitens, Scharf served as a violent crimes prosecutor in the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Missouri before joining now-Solicitor General D. John Sauer's James Otis Law Group. It was in private practice that Scharf became an attorney for Trump and defended the president from an indictment by former special counsel Jack Smith over attempts to overturn the 2020 election.

"Will is Tough, Strong, and Smart!" Trump posted on Truth Social about the former federal appellate court clerk and Princeton University and Harvard Law School graduate. "He also loves our Country, and respects the Law."

At the same time, the White House and sources close to the Trump administration dismiss speculation that the president is replacing current White House counsel David Warrington with Scharf in preparation for an onslaught of congressional oversight should Democrats win a majority in one or both chambers in the Nov. 3 midterm elections.

"The White House is always prepared to respond to oversight requests, no matter who is in the House or Senate," a White House official told the *Washington Examiner*.

> **"I would expect [Scharf] to forcefully contest demands the White House views as illegitimate rather than simply accommodate Democratic committees.**
>
> *–Bud Cummins, former U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Arkansas*

Former House oversight committee Chairman Jason Chaffetz, a Utah Republican, described both Warrington and Scharf as "talented attorneys" who "both have the trust of the president."

"Either one of them would be exceptional in that position," Chaffetz told the *Washington Examiner*.

But Republican strategist John Feehery, former House Speaker Dennis Hastert's press secretary, said Scharf "will be more aggressive" than his predecessor.

"He has seen how Democrats operate with his experience with the Kavanaugh and Barrett nomination fights," Feehery told the *Washington Examiner* of how Scharf helped confirm Supreme Court Justices Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett. "Also, it is smart to get some more energy in that position because the next two years are going to be a real battle if the Democrats win. It's a big if, but rather be ready for it if it happens."

Former U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Arkansas Bud Cummins agreed that if Democrats retake the House, Scharf will be "at the center of fights over subpoenas, document demands, testimony, and executive privilege."

"Scharf is a litigator who knows the president, knows the administration, and is not likely to be intimidated by congressional threats," Cummins told the *Washington Examiner*. "I would expect him to forcefully contest demands the White House views as illegitimate

rather than simply accommodate Democratic committees."

To that end, Democrats have already previewed their strategy for next year if they win the House, presuming the White House will not cooperate with their investigations: target companies and financial firms with contracts, regulatory exposure, or other dealings with the administration.

Ty Cobb, who served as special White House counsel during Trump's first term, advising the president regarding Justice Department special counsel Robert Mueller's Russia investigation, concurred with Democrats' assessment.

"We'll start to see real defiance of lawfully issued congressional subpoenas and the court rulings that require the enforcement of those subpoenas," Cobb told the *Washington Examiner*. "Certainly, you're not going to see a Justice Department that honorably pursues the contempt charges that will be required in the face of that defiance. If Congress refers criminal contempt charges against somebody in the administration, they can't realistically expect DOJ to pursue those referrals as the law requires. We're just not going to see that, unlike what we have seen historically and recently experienced with [Steve] Bannon and [Peter] Navarro."

Cobb, who also predicted increased use of executive privilege, argued that White House counsels are supposed to maintain a degree of independence. The attorney pointed to Scharf's past claims that the 2020 election was stolen as cause for concern.

Although Scharf was once Trump's personal attorney and has assisted him in expanding his presidential powers through executive action, he has exercised independence, reportedly criticizing a proposal from Stephen Miller, the White House deputy chief of staff for policy, to end habeas corpus for illegal immigrants.

A former Trump campaign official and colleague of Scharf emphasized the new White House counsel's character, contending he is "probably one of the most popular staff members" in the administration.

For instance, Scharf organized a well-attended first 100 days party last year at a bar in Washington.

"He's just a really sharp, dedicated, hardworking guy," the former campaign official told the *Washington Examiner*. "He's one of the guys you want to be in a foxhole with because, like I said, he keeps a good amount of levity in the office around him. Doesn't get too hot, doesn't get too cold, and just inspires a lot of confidence amongst his colleagues." ★

Naomi Lim (@naomitlim) is a White House reporter at the Washington Examiner.

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POLITICS

Recalling a political analyst whose insight would have risen above the midterm elections din

Expert voice on the California law that led to Arnold Schwarzenegger's governorship went silent before proposed state statute overhaul took shape

By David Mark

A Democratic-sponsored California ballot measure aims to salve a long-festering political wound for Team Blue.

Voters in the Nov. 3 midterm elections will decide whether to significantly alter California's recall election law, a statute that's been on the books since 1911 but wasn't deployed successfully in a governor's race until 2003. When voters chose to replace Democratic Gov. Gray Davis — less than a year after winning reelection — with Republican movie star Arnold Schwarzenegger. And though Gov. Gavin Newsom (D-CA) beat back a GOP-initiated recall attempt in 2021, Democrats say it's time to change the current system.

It's one they call a distortion of democracy, in which a noisy political minority can effectively overthrow a duly elected statewide official. While defenders of the current recall law, often Republicans, say the ballot measure is a thinly veiled lawmaker incumbent protection racket for rogue politicians defying the public's anger over rising crime, high taxes, rampant homelessness, and onerous environmental standards. With these and other policy sins committed by Democrats in this deeply blue state.

The debate over Proposition 5 is likely to intensify as Election Day nears. One that will miss the dispassionate yet deeply knowledgeable voice of the nation's widely acknowledged recall expert — Berkeley, California-based Joshua Spivak, who died peacefully in his sleep on July 12, 2025, at age 51.

Spivak was a senior research fellow at UC Berkeley Law's California Constitution Center, among other academic affiliations. Spivak, a Columbia Law School alum, was also a longtime West Coast anchor for Ripp Media/Public Relations, a top communications firm, based in New York City.

Joshua Spivak was the consensus expert on American recall elections.

"Josh was a perfect fit for my media relations practice focused on law firms and legal affairs," eponymous firm founder and Spivak's boss for more than 20 years, Allan Ripp, wrote in an Aug. 5, 2025 remembrance. Ripp added that Spivak was a hot media commodity himself if a recall election qualified for the ballot somewhere.

> **"Whenever an elected official anywhere faced a recall, Josh was sought out by news outlets around the country for perspective and legal analysis.**
> *–Allan Ripp*

"Whenever an elected official anywhere faced a recall," Ripp wrote about the father of two young men, in college and high school, who first moved west from his native Brooklyn when his wife Amelia was starting a Ph.D. in mathematics at UC Berkeley. "Josh was sought out by news outlets around the country for perspective and legal analysis."

Spivak was routinely interviewed about and quoted in *The New York Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and KQED (the San Francisco-based Bay Area NPR affiliate). Plus a range of other news outlets in the United States and abroad.

There was no shortage of subject matter fodder. In 39 states, local officials can be subject to recall elections. California is among 19 states that permit recalls of state-level officials.

Spivak was, as UC Berkeley Law noted in an Aug. 5, 2025, remembrance, "the nation's foremost — nay, only — expert on recall elections. He was a thinker and scholar who published many works to define the field he pioneered: books, academic journal articles, and hundreds of public commentary pieces."

That included six pieces for this magazine in the first half of 2025. Among the highlights: "The end of the founders' presidency" (Jan. 31); "Campaigns for new statewide jobs in 2026 likely mean foregoing 2028 presidential runs" (March 7); and "Senators make a beeline for open governorships" (June 20).

In October 2003, under the California recall law in place since 1911, voters removed Democratic Gov. Gray Davis from office and replaced him with Republican movie star Arnold Schwarzenegger. State Democrats now aim to alter the recall law through Proposition 5, which California voters will consider in the Nov. 3 midterm elections.

Each column brought a unique analytic take to the political news of the day. With a thematic throughline emphasizing that members of Congress in both parties have, in recent decades, ceded constitutionally granted powers to the executive branch. A turn of events that has distorted the careful checks and balances envisioned by the Founding Fathers. And this ongoing lapse in respect for constitutional structures made the type of daily executive branch power grabs by President Donald Trump during his second, nonconsecutive term almost inevitable.

REFORMING THE RECALL?

Spivak, no doubt, would have been busy with analysis about the California recall statewide ballot measure. The proposal's central change to current law is a provision that applies to each recall attempt of a state-level official. It consists of two separate ballot questions. Voters are first asked a "yes" or "no" question about whether they want to remove the incumbent.

The state-level official recall ballot's next part has voters pick among the candidates vying to replace them. The incumbent can't run in that replacement "election," which denies them two bites of the political apple.

The rub is that the replacement results only matter if a majority votes "yes" on the first question. If a majority of voters reject recalling the incumbent, nothing happens. That was the situation in 2021 when the question before voters, "Shall Gavin Newsom be recalled (removed) from the office of Governor?" received a nearly 62% "no" vote and only a 38% "yes" vote.

That proved a starkly different result from the 2003 California gubernatorial recall, when voters chose to recall Davis, a Sacramento political veteran who was chief of staff to a prior governor, a state assemblyman, a state controller, and California's lieutenant governor, before he won the governorship in 1998.

In 2023, a "yes" recall of Davis earned 55.39% to 44.61% for the "no" side. Schwarzenegger, a first-time candidate, finished first in the gubernatorial replacement race that included 135 candidates. Schwarzenegger earned 48.6%, to 31.5% for his closest Democratic rival, then-Lt. Gov. Cruz Bustamante. Rep. Tom McClintock (R-CA), then a state legislator, drew 13.5%.

The successful recall effort was, in hindsight, an early sign of populist anger at the political status quo, which manifested nationally 13 years later with the election of Trump, a real estate developer and celebrity game show host. Even as their styles differed greatly, with Schwarzenegger offering a sunny, California can-do optimism about free markets and Trump emphasizing an angry, often gloomy, populist-nationalist vision.

And while Schwarzenegger won by playing by the rules — and then capturing a full, four-year gubernatorial term in the 2006 elections — California Democrats have long been angry about that 23-year-old turn of events because California is such a Democratic state, and a Republican still win on their political turf.

Democrats and "good government" critics contend this system is fundamentally undemocratic. If a "yes" vote prevails, the successor can get elected with less than a majority of the vote, as Schwarzenegger did. That's because all the candidates from all parties run on a single ballot without any primary or runoff to winnow the field.

So, Proposition 5, which the state's Democratic-led legislature voted to place on this year's ballot back in 2024, would amend the state constitution to change the process. Under the proposed amendment, voters would simply be asked whether or not they want to recall the incumbent. If the governor is ousted, the lieutenant governor would automatically take over.

Ballot measure opponents argue that the proposal would limit voter power and serve as a shield for incumbent politicians. The ballot measure, these critics say, runs counter to the recall law's spirit and intent. Voters approved it in 1911 as a way to check corrupt state officials beholden to deep-pocketed railroad titans and other entrenched special interests, they note.

There have been 56 attempts to recall a governor since California adopted the process in the early 20th century. The Schwarzenegger "Total Recall" election was the only one to work. That's the kind of fact Spivak would have had ready to recite in any waking moment — and the type of context about a proposed major change to California campaigns and elections for which he'll be so missed. ★

David Mark (@DavidMarkDC) is the managing editor of the Washington Examiner *magazine.*

EXAMINER ILLUSTRATION; JAE C. HONG/AP; NAM Y. HUH/AP

Birch Bayh

Evan Bayh

Beau Bayh

CAMPAIGN

A Bayh-gone era for Indiana Democrats?

Hoosier State's Team Blue nominates a political scion in three-way secretary of state race

By Tom LoBianco

SOUTH BEND, Indiana — Tall, young, brimming with confidence and low-key Midwest swagger, a scion of the Bayh political family recently campaigned for Indiana's secretary of state and in the process, striking fear in the heart of the state's powerful GOP while wooing Hoosiers with a message of kicking out corrupt politicians.

Forty years ago, that would have described a young Evan Bayh, the charismatic son of former Indiana Sen. Birch Bayh. The elder Bayh had been a national figure during his 1963 to 1981 Senate tenure. He wrote two successfully ratified constitutional amendments. One was the 25th Amendment, which clarified rules for presidential succession, vice presidential vacancies, and handling presidential disability. The other was the 26th Amendment, lowering the federal and state voting age from 21 to 18. Birch Bayh also ran for president in 1976, but lost reelection for his Senate seat four years later to GOP rival Dan Quayle, then a House member and the future vice president.

Evan Bayh won a measure of family political redemption in 1986 when Indiana voters chose him as secretary of state. It also started a decadeslong march of electoral success for Democrats in the traditionally conservative state. The younger Bayh was elected governor of Indiana in 1988, and after his eight years leading the state, he held a Senate seat from 1999 to 2011. Evan Bayh's national profile rose to the point that he landed on the short list for Barack Obama's running mate in 2008.

Now it's one of Evan Bayh's sons, Beau Bayh, seeking office in Indiana. On Aug. 8 at Potawatomi Park in South Bend, Beau Bayh delivered a kick-out-the-bums rallying cry to regular applause from 150 or so Democratic activists and local candidates. Beau Bayh, 30, is running for Indiana's secretary of state — seeking not only his father's political starter job from four decades ago but also trying to resurrect the moribund Democratic brand in the Hoosier State.

It's been 14 years since Democrats won a statewide race in Indiana. Since then, Republicans have cemented control of both Senate seats, the governor's office, overwhelming supermajorities in the state's House and Senate, and no less than a White House-led effort to eliminate the state's remaining two Democratic members of Congress (which was its own source of chaotic drama). President Donald Trump won Indiana in 2024 by 59% to 40% over Democratic rival Kamala Harris.

So, in the wilderness and under siege, the state's remaining Democratic Party brass set their sights on Birch Evans "Beau" Bayh IV to spark something close to a renaissance. All from the office that oversees election administration and business licensing.

In other words, no pressure.

A THREE-WAY RACE

Speaking just off to the side from the picnic tables filled with activists, Bayh told the *Washington Examiner* he was called to public service by a desire to help and to clean out the corruption he said has grown in the past four years.

"I was raised in a family of public servants, and I was always taught growing up that no one forces you to run for public office, but if you decide to do that, you ought to do it to help your community, your state, and your country," Beau Bayh said before taking the mic at the St. Joseph's County Democrats third annual Picnic in the Park. "When I see the current secretary of state use his position of trust with the public, his office, not as it means to benefit our state, as it means to benefit himself, that kind of offends my sense of what a public servant should be."

In any normal situation, the race would be a cakewalk for the candidate with the "R" next to their name.

But a whirlwind of state and national scandals, a chaotic intraparty Republican fight, and the emergence of a third-party wild card — as well as interviews with more than two dozen Indiana Democratic and Republican operatives over the last few months — give the impression Beau Bayh could indeed win in November.

Indiana's secretary of state is rarely a blockbuster race, but in the absence of a governor's race or top-tier Senate battle, it's the main draw. The (limited)

HENRY GRIFFIN/AP; HARAZ N. GHANBARI/AP; PHOTO VIA BEAUBAYH.COM

Republican Max Engling

Secretary of State Diego Morales

Former Indianapolis Mayor Greg Ballard

publicly available data reveal a surprising three-way showdown between Bayh, Republican Max Engling — a former congressional aide and losing 2024 House candidate — and former Indianapolis Mayor Greg Ballard, running as an independent under the banner of his newly created Lincoln Party.

Bayh had $2.3 million in the bank at the end of June. Engling is sitting on a meager $15,000 after a late entry (more on that in a second). And Ballard has raised and spent close to $1 million, according to numbers compiled by the *Indiana Capital Chronicle*.

Beau Bayh looks comfortable working the crowd, talking with older Democrats long sold on the Bayh brand dating back to Birch Bayh's time in office and younger activists with barely a memory of the Bayh family reign.

"We need leaders here in our state that recognize that what we have in common as Americans and Hoosiers will always be more important than the little things they try and use to divide us amongst each other," Bayh told the crowd. "I know, some folks here today might call me naive. I get it. I see this vitriol in our politics, I'm subjected to it myself, as is every brave person who's had the courage to put their name on the ballot here this fall."

At his back is a strong team of Indiana veterans and national Democratic operatives with Hoosier ties, including Mike Schmuhl, an architect of Pete Buttigieg's rise from South Bend mayor with an unpronounceable last name to standout national Democratic star.

"Beau is an excellent candidate," said Schmuhl, a senior adviser to Beau Bayh and veteran Indiana Democratic leader. "He's doing all the right things. He's very disciplined. He has a professional team. He's taking it very seriously. He's raising the resources to win a statewide race in Indiana, something we haven't done obviously since 2012."

But the state's Democratic Party infrastructure, which was built on a framework of union workers, teachers, and rural and urban coalitions, has been gutted in recent decades through a mix of factory closures, offshoring, and strategic cuts to union and teacher support by the state's dominant Republican Party.

Coming out of the summer, Beau Bayh looks in a surprisingly strong position, but the fall homestretch appears to be a grueling battle.

Bayh and his team built a strategy of running against the state's unpopular incumbent Republican Secretary of State Diego Morales, who allegedly used tax dollars to buy a $90,000 GMC Yukon Denali from a dealer who donated to his campaign, traveled the globe on secret trips, and kicked up a steady storm of mini-scandals.

Just days before the filing deadline, the state's new GOP powerbrokers, Sen. Jim Banks (R-IN) and Attorney General Todd Rokita, called for Morales to leave the race. After he refused, they helped former congressional staffer Engling oust Morales at the state party convention.

Engling, a new Republican candidate with a clean record and strong ties in Washington and Indiana — not unlike Beau Bayh himself — entered the race late with an initial fundraising deficit.

But all expectations are that fundraising will pick up easily for the new candidate, not least because of his strong ties to former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, a GOP fundraising juggernaut.

STILL A RED STATE

Republicans are confident they'll have plenty of material to blast Beau Bayh with as the fall campaign heats up, starting with what critics call Beau Bayh's rather tenuous ties to Indiana.

Bayh was born in Indianapolis when his father was governor. After Evan Bayh was elected to the Senate in 1998, the family moved to Washington, D.C. Beau Biden graduated from St. Albans School and then Harvard College. He was then commissioned in the Marine Corps and deployed to Europe following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. He was honorably discharged at the rank of captain in 2023.

Bayh earned a Juris Doctor from Harvard Law School and moved to Westfield, Indiana, to study for the bar exam in 2024. After passing, he clerked for a federal appeals court judge and then joined an Indianapolis law firm.

Indiana connections to Bayh family members have already proven a political liability. Evan Bayh's ill-fated 2016 Senate comeback bid, after six years out of office, was undone in no small part by attacks that he was too much Washington and had forgotten his Hoosier roots. This was punctuated by an *Indianapolis Star* investigation that showed neighbors at his Indianapolis condo rarely, if ever, saw him.

And the "carpetbagger" attack has already been primed in a tough intraparty Democratic battle in which Army veteran Blythe Potter's supporters roundly knocked Beau Bayh as an elite Ivy League product of Washington with little connection to Indiana beyond his last name. (Beau Bayh beat Potter at the state party convention 1,385 to 883 — hardly a knockout.)

The wild card for Beau Bayh and the GOP's Engling, ironically, is the surprisingly well-funded third-party bid of Ballard. He was Indianapolis's mayor from 2008 to 2016, as a Republican. He joined the secretary of state's race as an independent amid mounting reports of corruption by Morales, the GOP incumbent.

For Beau Bayh and the state's Democrats seeking an institutional foothold, they're now bracing for a flood of money for Engling and a subsequent wave of attacks in the final months of the race. ★

Tom LoBianco is editor and co-founder of 24sight News*, based in Silver Spring, Maryland. He is the author of the biography about President Donald Trump's first vice president,* Piety & Power: Mike Pence and the Taking of the White House*, and was an Indiana statehouse reporter for the* Associated Press.

PHOTO VIA MAXFORINDIANA.COM; MICHAEL CONROY/AP; MICHAEL CONROY/AP

CRILLY
Washington Secrets

Welcome to this week's edition of Washington Secrets. *We got a sneak peek at Sean Duffy's family road trip through America last night. And what a lot of fun it is. At every turn, he is cut to shreds by his wise-cracking wife (who knows a thing or two about TV after all) and his sharp-eyed kids. It makes RFK Jr.'s cookery show look like amateur hour …*

Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy, left, and his wife Rachel Campos-Duffy, right, are joined by their children after being sworn in by Vice President JD Vance, center, at the White House on Jan. 29, 2025.

ROD LAMKEY, JR./AP

Meet the Duffies: Trump's transportation secretary takes his family on a romp through America

Mom takes a sideways look at the security guards as she steers the family SUV through the gates to the White House.

"These Secret Service are very handsome," she says, to the horror of her teenage daughters.

"Mom," squeals 17-year-old Paloma.

"You are being recorded," says 15-year-old Mud.

"Oh," says mom with a broad grin. After all, this is Rachel Campos Duffy, co-host of *Fox and Friends Weekend*, who is driving the family to link up with their dad Sean Duffy, whom she met on MTV's spin-off reality series *Road Rules: All Stars*. He also happens to be transportation secretary.

It is that sort of road trip: a raucous family vacation through some of the nation's best-known monuments and tourist stops, all played for knowing laughs and delivered with a dose of family values.

Six episodes of "The Great American Road Trip" dropped on YouTube on Aug. 19. It is designed to showcase the best of the country in its 250th year.

But you will remember the headlines when it was announced and the truckload of trouble the show's sponsors triggered. If companies such as Boeing and Toyota were each dishing up a reported $1 million, and the likes of Waymo and Royal Caribbean Group were backing the project, wasn't there something of a conflict of interest for a man whose job was to regulate them?

None of which bothers Duffy, as he ambles through the episodes, cracking dad jokes, embarrassing his nine

children, and coming off worse in the banter with his wife.

"I'm Rachel Campos Duffy. I have nine kids," she says by way of introduction, before being cut off by her Cabinet Secretary husband.

"We have nine kids," he corrects her.

"I had them, though," she points out, eyes rolling as if to say, "Look at what I'm dealing with here."

First stop is Philadelphia, which Mom seems to suggest was the birthplace of democracy, something the Greeks may dispute.

Day 1 ends with an exhausted family settling down for bed and preparing for Day 2.

"It'll be fun," said Mrs. Duffy. Her slightly unconvincing words suggest she knows what is coming next.

Her Cabinet secretary husband slaps her on the ass, adding: "There you go."

Morning sees the family meeting several gnarly old actors playing Founding Fathers. Although it turns out the one giving the tedious introduction to the Liberty Bell is, in fact, Interior Secretary Doug Burgum.

Despite his best efforts, comedy gold is never more than a few seconds away. When Duffy goes for a closer look at the chair used by George Washington as he presided over the Constitutional Conference, a weary member of staff pipes up: "Don't sit in it!"

Episode 2 takes the family to Fort Worth, Texas, so the Cabinet secretary can fulfill his cowboy fantasies.

But first, though, he has to embarrass his children with some line dancing.

"I think this is a good example for the kids," says the sort of father who sees a life lesson in cowboy boots and two steps. "The kids know their dad can't dance, right? 100%. But don't let fear crush you."

The fear crushes Lucia, 19, within minutes. When she sees her father wiggle his ass.

"No, Dad, stop," she says. "I actually can't ..."

The fun only slows when those pesky sponsors pop up. For some dubious work-related reason, Duffy breaks off to visit the site of CRH, which he gushingly describes as "the leading company that provides asphalt, concrete in America."

It is an awkward interlude, although *Secrets* is relieved that the sponsors have poured money into it.

We have seen the latest episode of Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy's cooking show. It is the one where he stands awkwardly in a kitchen watching celebrity chef Geoffrey Zakarian make an omelet, so we are deeply grateful for the whiff of corruption and the slick production values the sponsorship dollars supplied.

But it does all rather raise the question of who this road trip is for. Will it really encourage a new generation of sightseers to go to a dude ranch in Texas?

Does it matter when the 30-minute episodes are packed with belly laughs?

The main takeaway is that the Duffies have nine extraordinary children, who can be relied on for banter and exasperated eyerolls, and that their parents — both alumni of the Real World, of course — know exactly how to make a reality show.

The only question is: So what are they running for? ★

No, Tom Cotton is not about to lose

Wait, what? How is this even a story? Sen. Tom Cotton (R-AR) is a Republican running in the deep-red state of Arkansas, which Donald Trump won by 30 points just two years ago.

Well, a poll published two weeks ago rather upended expectations. Sure, it was from a progressive campaign firm, 2040 Strategy Group, but a poll showing that Cotton had only a 3-point lead over first-time candidate Hallie Shoffner suddenly put the state in play.

The numbers were enough for our friends at J.L. Partners to take a closer look and run their own poll. They shared the numbers with *Secrets*.

The results show that Cotton may be down on Trump's massive margin, but in fact, he is leading Shoffner by 51% to 35%. ★

When economists go to war

Economist Daron Acemoglu, 2024 Nobel prize winner in Economics.

Secrets loves a good row among academics. And *The Economist* has a great one, quoting well-lubricated economists on the work of Daron Acemoglu, who won a Nobel Prize in 2024 for his work on how institutions shape prosperity.

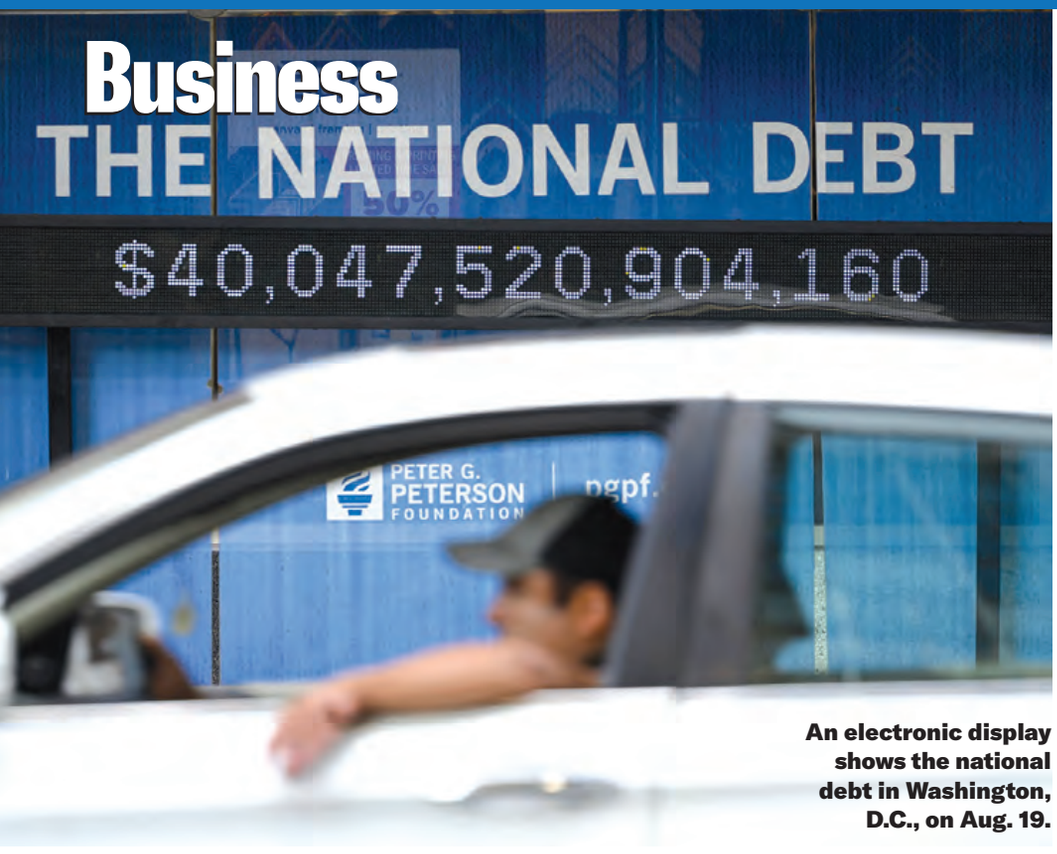
"Much of his theoretical work is useful, but he uses his models to inform populist policies that have been tried before and failed," says one.

"I am not happy about the *Economist*'s article, which feels like a hit piece. There is also a background to it, which is more troubling (as I will share at some point). I asked them to allow me to respond. I am waiting for their answer. If not in the magazine, I will share my response here," Acemoglu responded on X.

Excellent. *Secrets* will bring the popcorn. ★

You are reading Washington Secrets, *a guide to power and politics in D.C. and beyond. It is written by Rob Crilly, who you can reach at secrets@washingtonexaminer.com with your comments, story tips, and suggestions.*

PETROS GIANNAKOURIS/AP



An electronic display shows the national debt in Washington, D.C., on Aug. 19.

MANDEL NGAN / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

NATIONAL DEBT

Budget red ink threatens to spike inflation and unemployment

Neither party is focused on shrinking worsening deficits and national debt levels

By Zach Halaschak

The ticking time bomb that is the national debt just crossed the $40 trillion mark and could spark a fiscal crisis that would throw the economy into disarray, spiking unemployment and exploding inflation.

Republicans and some centrist Democrats have long sounded the alarm about growing debt and deficits. The debt first crossed the $1 trillion mark in 1981, but lawmakers of both parties have done little to reduce debt and deficits since the temporary run of balanced budgets from fiscal 1998 through 2001.

Now, some are warning that the burden of that debt could spark a spiraling crisis that would affect everyone.

Former Rep. Carolyn Bourdeaux, who is now the executive director of the Concord Coalition, which focuses on balancing the budget, told the *Washington Examiner* that there is a "failure of imagination" among most analysts where they simply can't imagine a scenario in which Congress "absolutely fails to act in the teeth of a crisis, or the bond market fails to respond to a potential crisis."

Bourdeaux, a Georgia Democrat who represented an Atlanta-area district from 2021 to 2023, noted the potential for a death spiral of sorts when it comes to debt and interest rates — something that could result in massively deleterious effects for the economy and consumers.

"If we have to issue more debt or print money, that will then cause the interest rates to go up further, which then causes us to have to print money or issue debt to cover those interest payments," she said. "We get into a spiral of both inflation and rising interest rates. So stagflation, which has the potential to be a disaster for the economy."

Stagflation is seen as one of the worst economic scenarios that could play out. Stagflation, a portmanteau of stagnation and inflation, is when prices are rising while economic growth and the labor market are languishing.

Bourdeaux said one could look to other countries that have experienced crises in the past.

"The causes that led to the crisis are different, but it is possible that the experience would be the same in countries like Argentina, or Greece, or Turkey, where they experienced inflation not at 3% a year, but at 100% a year or higher," the former congresswoman warned.

Inflation clocking in at 100% might seem unimaginable to consumers and would disproportionately hurt salaried workers — those largely dependent on investment income would be better able to weather such a crisis, Bourdeaux said.

For instance, if someone is earning $100,000 before, with 100% inflation, that same person would need to have their salary doubled to $200,000 just to keep up their status quo.

"The people who struggle to weather it are those who have to renegotiate their salary, renegotiate their pay on a regular basis," she said. "It's much stickier and much more difficult to keep up. Anything held in cash will be degraded."

Desmond Lachman, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, told the *Washington Examiner* that there have recently been some warning signs about the situation that have gone along with that $40 trillion milestone. For instance, the 30-year Treasury rate recently spiked to the highest level since 2001.

"So markets are beginning to say, you know, what's going on? That these guys can't finance themselves — this is just a whole big Ponzi scheme," he said. "So you've got a lot of signs that there's already trouble brewing."

And the situation is even more complicated in that there is no clear timeline for when a crisis might occur.

"One of the scariest things about worst-case scenarios is it's impossible to say how close we are to a crisis," David Ditch, a policy analyst at the Cato Institute, told the *Washington Examiner*.

Ditch said he doesn't consider a worst-case crisis an immediate threat, like in the next year or so, but the odds go up over time.

WAR-GAMING FISCAL DISASTER

What exactly a fiscal crisis might look like, and the severity of such a crisis, is not possible to predict. The Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget released a paper analyzing various crisis scenarios, including a financial crisis, an inflation crisis, an austerity crisis, a currency crisis, a default crisis, and a gradual crisis.

Of crucial note, the CRFB said several of these crises could happen simultaneously, which would be even more disastrous for consumers.

In the case of a financial crisis, the group warns that high and growing debt could degrade investor confidence in the country's fiscal outlook and cause interest rates to spike, which could then "set off a panic," further exacerbating the crisis and hurting financial markets.

"This could lead to a series of cascading failures at financial institutions, which could have ripple effects across the economy — making it difficult for individuals and businesses to make payments or receive loans and sparking a wave of defaults, rising unemployment, business failures, and foreclosures," the paper reads.

The CRFB said in the "most extreme case" of trying to avoid a financial crisis or default without addressing the underlying debt, the Federal Reserve or government could monetize the debt, essentially printing money to finance the debt. That could lead to spiraling inflation.

An inflation crisis could result in businesses shuttering and unemployment rising. Such high inflation, as has been seen in other countries, could also have escalating noneconomic side effects.

"These types of crises typically go hand in hand with enormous social and political unrest," Bourdeaux said.

Stagflation could become a reality, featuring high unemployment and explosive inflation.

For a long time, economists did not think stagflation was possible because they believed that higher inflation could be traded off for lower unemployment. The notion of high inflation being married to low unemployment and vice versa was turned on its head in the 1970s when both high inflation and stagnating growth occurred simultaneously, causing pain for consumers.

Ditch said it is very challenging to predict what the consequences of all of this might be and what a worst-case scenario might look like, but he pointed out that consumers are already experiencing higher borrowing costs, and in a crisis, those could shoot higher.

That would mean credit card balances going up, mortgage costs shooting up, and making homebuying more challenging.

"It's going to be a lot harder to borrow money to start a new business, harder to borrow to expand a business, and if you make it harder for businesses to get the capital they need, that's going to mean fewer job openings," Ditch said.

Ditch also warned about the possibility of spiraling inflation. Inflation hit a recent multidecade high of nearly 9% in June 2022 and is still the No. 1 concern for voters four years later.

"What people perceive as a cost-of-living problem right now could spiral into a cost-of-living crisis that we experienced to a certain extent in 2021, but on a more prolonged basis back in the 1970s," he added.

> **"If we have to issue more debt or print money, that will then cause the interest rates to go up further, which then causes us to have to print money or issue debt to cover those interest payments.**
>
> *–Former Rep. Carolyn Bourdeaux, who is now the executive director of the Concord Coalition*

The Congressional Budget Office, Congress's nonpartisan scorekeeper, has been warning about the severe consequences of not addressing the growing national debt for years.

In February, the CBO projected that federal debt held by the public would reach 101% of GDP this year. By 2030, debt will exceed 108% of GDP, surpassing the all-time high during World War II. The CBO said debt is projected to be 175% of GDP by 2056.

In its report, the CBO warned of "far-reaching implications" if debt continues to grow faster than the country's GDP. It said one of the consequences could be another financial crisis.

"The risk of a fiscal crisis — that is, a situation in which investors lose confidence in the value of the U.S. government's debt — would increase," the report reads. "Such a crisis would cause interest rates to rise abruptly and other economic and financial disruptions to occur."

And to stave off a crisis, experts say the government and Congress would have to get serious about trying to balance the budget.

The situation is tricky for lawmakers because if they were to make tough decisions, such as raising taxes or dramatically cutting spending on popular programs to balance the budget, they could face the threat of having that used against them by a political opponent and being voted out of office.

"Anybody serious in Washington knows that this is going to require both expenditure cuts and revenue increases, and you can see the problem there," Bourdeaux said. "Nobody wants to put any of those kinds of ideas on the table ... even though everybody behind the scenes, behind closed doors, understands that this is necessary.

"So what we need is to convey to people how very serious a problem this can become, very quickly, if we don't address it." ★

Zach Halaschak (@zhalaschak) is the economics reporter for the Washington Examiner.

TIANA'S TAKE

Bond market meltdown shows MAGA needs a deficit-reducing response before election day

International markets are rattled by global events. That was made clear by the Aug. 18 widespread global selloff of U.S. Treasury securities, raising 30-year yields to roughly 5.34%, the highest level since 2007.

There are several causes for the rising investor anxiety. This includes renewed conflict in the Middle East, along with a continued guessing game about the Federal Reserve's intentions regarding interest rates.

Primarily, though, America's bleak fiscal situation is quelling investor confidence. The U.S. Treasury bond selloff coincided with the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office's release of statistics that the national debt is about to cross the $40 trillion threshold. Put another way, existing national debt now consumes 3.3% of the entire U.S. economic output and 19% of every dollar Uncle Sam collects.

And of course, elevated borrowing costs have trickled down to ticked-off consumers; 30-year fixed mortgage rates remain above 6.7%, 70 basis points higher than they were six months ago.

AN INVESTOR WARNING SHOT

Bond investors are correctly sounding the alarm that the federal deficit is no longer tenable. CBO has raised its deficit projection for fiscal 2026 by $200 billion to $2.1 trillion. The impending fiscal crisis is not the $40 trillion national debt itself; rather, it's that deficit spending is growing so rapidly that buyers no longer have the appetite to allow Americans to finance it at the ultra-low rates we've relied on for the past 20 years.

Even if the flood of red ink seems an academic exercise to many, higher buyer costs are sure to get voters' attention a bit over two months out from the Nov. 3 midterm elections. President Donald Trump's administration has a chance to limit the damage by making one final stab at a deficit-reducing bill on Capitol Hill. Big-spending congressional Democrats are never going to play ball legislatively. So, this would have to be done through the budget reconciliation process, which allows the Senate to skirt its normal 60-vote threshold to overcome a filibuster and pass legislation with a simple majority of 51 votes in the 100-member chamber.

The proposal would have to be large enough in spending cuts to actually move Treasury investors, politically palatable enough to garner the support of the MAGA base and a party-line vote in Congress, and limited enough in scope to pass muster with the Senate Parliamentarian. So, instead of spending energy on the SAVE America Act, rewriting the entire immigration system, or (as I would prefer) taking a hammer to Social Security, all of which are banned from being included in reconciliation packages, Reconciliation 3.0 ought to take a selective approach to reforms. Including targeting spending on noncitizens, Medicare waste, and inefficient visa allocation. Crucially, it cannot raise taxes on citizens and impede the economic growth that we're relying on to avoid a debt crisis.

DEBT-SLASHING RECONCILIATION LEGISLATION

Let's start with the most boring provisions of the bunch: healthcare. The CBO estimates that broad, site-neutral Medicare payment reforms could save $157 billion over the next 10 years. Modernizing Medicare cost-sharing, namely by consolidating the separate deductibles of Parts A and B and restricting Medigap from covering that deductible, would save $200 billion over the next decade. The Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget projects that allowing private Medicare Advantage plans to compete against traditional Medicare options would save another $450 billion, and reducing Medicare Advantage overpayments would save $780 billion.

Building on last year's One Big Beautiful Bill Act and fully banning the use of provider taxes would save $600 billion, and freezing the income thresholds for Medicare premiums would save $290 billion. Include the Lower Health Care Premiums for All Americans Act, a priority of House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA) that has already passed the chamber, and we've saved another $35.6 billion. Without raising a single tax, these basic healthcare reforms, taken individually, combine to over $2 trillion.

Reconciliation may very narrowly allow Congress to reorganize visa allocation at the margins. But because not all immigrants contribute equally to the country, even minimal changes could yield significant savings. Over a ten-year window, these efforts would save about $10 billion.

While the Senate Parliamentarian would be unlikely to allow a reconciliation bill to outright ban the allocation of green cards to the older parents of adult citizens, the Manhattan Institute has recommended imposing a fee of $260,000 to bring a parent to the country, equivalent to the net fiscal cost those older parents usually incur to the federal deficit. The estimated net savings would be $100 billion to $200 billion over a decade.

The Republican Study Committee has continued to tout two major cost-savers in its ongoing menu of reconciliation options: banning noncitizens from Medicaid, SNAP, housing assistance, and other federal benefits, which they estimate would save $231 billion. And requiring federal agencies to only consider citizens when allocating population-based funding streams for cities and urban centers, which they somewhat optimistically project would save $629 billion. Let's round down to account for overlap and say that together these provisions would save closer to $700 or $800 billion.

All in all, this incredibly rudimentary framework would net trillions in savings without raising a single tax, touching Social Security, or meaningfully slashing benefits for working-class citizens. I'm willing to wager that short of blowing the Strait of Hormuz open and the ayatollah up tomorrow, only a deficit reduction this large will meaningfully save the bond market. ★

Tiana Lowe Doescher (@TianaTheFirst) is an economics columnist for the *Washington Examiner*.

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COURTESY OF DISNEY

Emmy Rossum in *Furious*.

"*Furious* is, on its surface, a simple cat-and-mouse thriller of the kind regularly produced for big and small screens. But the show is also a character study of greater-than-usual sophistication."
Graham Hillard, P. 56

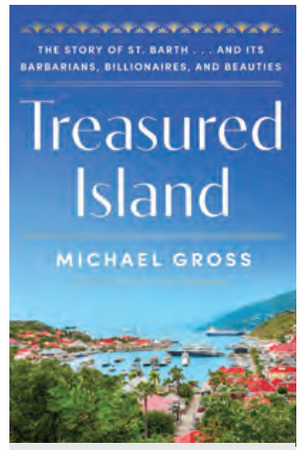
BOOKS

The Have Yachts of St. Barth

By Carson Becker

The world is an oligarchic place these days. While the relentless rise in international travel has diminished the traditional exclusivity of some early jet-set destinations, there have emerged several geographic poles where it is increasingly difficult for the common man to gain true access. These include Monaco, Swiss ski resorts such as Gstaad and St. Moritz, and, to a lesser extent, Dubai. Among the most desirable and secluded of these bolt holes for the super-rich (not the mere cosmopolitan wealthy, but the much rarer class of "have yachts") is the small, French-owned, volcanic island of St. Barthelemy, known colloquially as St. Barth. It can be reached only by sea or by puddle jumper flight from places including St. Martin; there is no golf course, and, quite unusual for the region, its inhabitants are almost exclusively white (St. Martin's population, just 15 miles away, is conversely almost entirely black).

In *Treasured Island: The Story of St. Barth ... and Its Barbarians, Billionaires, and Beauties*, his colorful, definitive, deeply researched new book, which borders on an oral history, the author (and seasoned St. Barth vacationer) Michael Gross profiles this small, beautiful island and the bizarre personalities who have transformed it from a sleepy, impoverished backwater into the pinnacle of elite luxury.



Treasured Island: The Story of St. Barth ... and Its Barbarians, Billionaires, and Beauties
By Michael Gross
Harper
416 pp.; $35.00

Located just north of St. Kitts and southeast of St. Martin in the West Indies, the 9-square-mile island, with a population of just over 10,000, has a remarkable and little-known history. Christopher Columbus is said to have named it after his brother upon discovering the isle in 1493. It was briefly taken over by the Knights of Malta until a band of seafaring Carib tribes arrived in canoes and massacred them. In 1784, Sweden's king, Gustav III, traded the island with France in exchange for favorable access to the North Sea port of Gothenburg. At the time, St. Barth's constituted the entirety of Sweden's overseas empire; Gustav quickly established a free port and a haven for debtors there. Trade, largely in contraband, soon made the island very rich. By 1800, the capital, renamed Gustavia, had become Sweden's sixth-largest town, and by 1813, the port had, rather impressively, processed one-fifth of American exports.

If the early 19th century had been a golden age for the Swedish-owned island, the latter half of the century constituted a period of growing irrelevance and steep economic decline. Stockholm, growing weary of its "costly indulgence" in the Western Hemisphere, tried in vain to offload the colonial real estate. A succession of prospective deals with Prussia, Italy, and the United States fell through. In 1878, it was returned to France after the latter wrote a large check and agreed to protect the island's status as a free port.

In 1890, a Catholic priest imported latanier tree seedlings, a crop that gave rise to a small, though in hindsight slightly pathetic, woven goods trade, which constituted St. Barthelemy's single export industry. Salt production, along with indigo and cotton planting, had all been abandoned by then. During the first half of the 20th century, the island was poor, depopulated, and without running water, electricity, or decent roads.

A new chapter began when the banker and Standard Oil heir David Rockefeller arrived in the late 1950s aboard his 95-foot ketch, the *Wayfarer*, with his wife Peggy in tow. The couple's love for St. Barth "altered the island's destiny," Gross writes. Rockefeller sought to "prevent the construction of resorts by buying whenever possible the large coastal land that might come up for sale," and

Luxury yachts docked in Gustavia Harbor, St. Barths.

GETTY IMAGES

took it upon himself "to shelter the island" from real-estate speculators and developers.

There was a time when the surest sign of immense wealth was in the defense of privacy and the pursuit of beauty. These days, the opposite appears to be true. If there was a time when oligarchic wealth seemed to inspire certain acts of noblesse oblige, today's St. Barth, with its $100,000 nightclub tables and mega yachts, seems to represent a global ruling elite that has grown much more materialist, short-termist, and vulgar in its appetites.

If there is anything certain about life on the island, however, it is change. Gross's secondhand accounts of the constantly evolving lifestyle range from the debauched (e.g., cocaine-fueled orgies and drug smuggling in the late 1970s; the first waves of celebrities, such as Jimmy Buffett and the band Fleetwood Mac) to the surprisingly deep political intrigue of the native population. In 1981, the Reagan administration's crackdown put an end to an era when smugglers who frequented the island were targeted by U.S. drug authorities. Another era came to an end after the 2008 financial crisis, which temporarily halted the Wall Streeters who were, at the time, "St. Barth's best customers." In response, the island sought to attract visitors from places farther afield, such as China and Russia.

Island politics are revealed to be a vibrant affair, complete with occasional arson attacks and armed standoffs. Apart from long-standing debates over autonomy and local rule, partly resolved in 2007 when the island became a separate collectivity of France rather than remaining part of Guadeloupe, the development of the island and the rights of locals in the face of endless waves of foreign money remain a constant, critical issue. This has never been an easy balance. "Certain folks controlled the island and they were all on the take," as the smuggler Barry Foy once recalled. "Money talked."

Primarily a work of social reportage, *Treasured Island* covers a remarkable cast of characters and insular dramas. These range from the adventurer and alleged smuggler Remy de Haenen, who was the first to land an airplane on St. Barth and who the novelist Jean Raspail once profiled in his travel writing, to David Rockefeller's Organization of American States-affiliated footman to the Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich. Rogues and brigands are the rule in this account, not the exception.

One gets the impression that Gross laments the changing nature of the island, which used to be exclusive "not because it was expensive but because it catered to a self-selecting band of elite and adventurous travelers who disdained golf courses, high-rise concrete block hotels, gambling, and native music, and could live without television." The author gives the impression that he would be more comfortable sailing with Rockefeller than getting bottle service at Nikki Beach with Tom Brady and Jake Paul, to name but two of the contemporary vacationers named herein.

In these pages, one begins to wonder whether the ostentatious ruling class of our epoch will stand the test of time, or eventually be swept away by unforeseen forces, like St. Barth's notorious hurricanes.

Carson Becker is an American writer.

BOOKS

A Novelist Considers What War Takes

By Malcolm Forbes

A student at Vanderbilt University, while World War I rages, Roy Young has his whole life ahead of him. More than this, he appears to have his life mapped out. After finishing his studies, he intends to return to Ewer's Rock, Virginia, and successfully modernize and manage his family's farm. He also expects to marry Samantha Hatton, the local minister's daughter and his closest friend since childhood. But when Roy comes home for the winter break, he is forced to revise one of his best-laid plans after Sam deals him a blunt truth. And when he returns again in the summer of 1917, he sidelines his other aim, swapping his rural corner of Virginia for the battlefields of France.

Kevin Powers's new novel follows Roy as he abandons his safe life and is propelled into the widespread chaos and indiscriminate slaughter of the Great War. But as its title suggests, *Children of the Wild* is the story of more than one individual. Powers charts the progress of Roy, Sam, and a third figure who comes between them. All three must overcome considerable challenges to remain positive and stay alive.

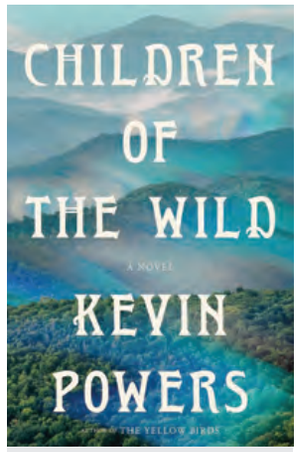
The beginning of the book, in Powers's native Virginia, takes the form of a calm before the storm. Powers presents Roy as an arrogant young man, too confident in his abilities and too presumptuous about how his choices will turn out. He doesn't truly love Sam; instead, "he loved the ease with which he could fit her into his vision of his life." Sam brings him down a peg by rebuffing him and asserting her right to make her own decisions.

As Roy slinks back to college with his tail between his legs, the narrative switches to Sam as she makes a series of trips out of Ewer's Rock and up into the highlands to get to know the "orphan in the wild" she has encountered there. He has no recollection of his family and no idea what his name is. "Never had one to know or not know," he tells Sam. She notices "Ennis Duke" written on a label inside his greatcoat. The name sticks, and a passionate romance develops. Ennis agrees to come down from the mountain and live with Sam among the other "flatlanders." There, he ingratiates himself with both Sam's father and Roy's family. He gets a job as a hand on Roy's father's estate and becomes adept with a gun as he guards the sheepfold. When a jealous and proprietorial Roy arrives back in town, he challenges Ennis to a fight, which, though it leaves them bruised and bloodied, brings them closer together. Roy sees his rival as a kindred spirit, both of them being "the kind of boys for whom violence was a native tongue." Speaking the same language, the pair form a tight bond.

That bond is threatened when Roy enlists "to fight the Hun." "I don't know anything about Germans, Roy," Ennis says. "Why would I want to kill them?" But soon he signs up, much to Sam's despair. After having fought against each other in a dusty yard, the two men find themselves fighting side by side on the Western Front. Meanwhile, on the home front, Sam looks on helplessly as the influenza epidemic spreads and wreaks devastation. "Sometimes it's hard not to think we live in the land of the dead," she remarks. Lieutenant Young and Private Duke, as they are now known, navigate

their own land of the dead, alert to German attacks yet unaware of what lies in store for them if they make it home in one piece.

It perhaps comes as no surprise to discover that the strongest part of *Children of the Wild* is that devoted to war. After all, Powers is a master chronicler of conflict. In his award-winning 2012 debut, *The Yellow Birds*, he reckoned with the Iraq War, the conflict in which he served as a machine-gunner with the Army, and in his 2018 follow-up, *A Shout in the Ruins*, he evoked the brutality of the Civil War. In both novels, he not only depicted battles lost and won, but also showed how the horrors and hardships endured or inflicted by soldiers continued to leave their mark long after truces had been signed and bodies had been buried.



Children of the Wild
By Kevin Powers
Harper
320 pp.; $30.00

In his new novel, Powers skillfully dramatizes each stage of his characters' journeys from innocent civilians to fearsome soldiers. Ennis's military career gets off to a bad start at Camp Lee when he announces that he can't read or specify where he was born. However, he goes on to prove himself a crack shot at the firing range, and once in France, he earns a reputation as a star sharpshooter. Roy shows courage under fire as he leads his men into "a perfect little piece of hell." Powers impresses with visceral scenes of savage bombardments and death-defying scrapes in front-line trenches, on open blasted land, in towns reduced to rubble, and in treacherous woods that one division calls Suicide Hill. Both men become battle-hardened, then war-ravaged. When fighting intensifies, one man goes missing, and the other runs out of ammunition. A keen sense of dread pervades the proceedings at this point and keeps us turning the pages to learn the protagonists' fates.

It would be a spoiler to reveal what happens to Roy and Ennis. What is worth mentioning, though, is Powers's well-crafted last act, which unfolds after the armistice. Hostilities in France might have ended, but trouble now brews at home as Roy's old Vanderbilt roommate, Fintan Thoreau, throws his weight around. He refused to "give up Harvard Law over a little spat in Sarajevo." Having become one of Virginia's most influential figures, he harbors grand plans to take over Ewer's Rock. Powers offers a gripping account of vengeance and a tender portrait of a man in search of redemption and completion.

Elsewhere, that momentum is sporadically impaired by dream sequences or supposed premonitions (which Roy's mother calls "signs and wonders"). Powers believes they are more interesting than they actually are. The narrative cranks back to life when characters aren't relaying or decoding reveries but getting on with more grounded matters such as falling in love, strengthening friendships, and, above all, waging combat.

Powers's blunt approach is particularly effective when describing Roy's headstrong temperament or Ennis's transformation into a trigger-happy killer of "Boche." But nothing is more blunt than this warning the men receive, and refuse to heed, about war: "It doesn't give. It only takes." What it takes and how it does so make for affecting reading.

Malcolm Forbes has written for the Economist*, the* Wall Street Journal*, and the* Washington Post*. He lives in Edinburgh.*

BOOKS

Traveling the Road That Led to Our National Identity

By Carl Paulus

I have never been especially drawn to landmarks. Battlefield plaques, preserved taverns, roadside markers — I understand the appeal, and I have stopped for a few. But they have always seemed less like history than tombstones: fragments of a past life that meant far more to those who erected them than to those who pause to read them decades later.

What an idiot I was.

Brady J. Crytzer's *The National Road: George Washington and America's First Highway West* forced me to see our nation's landmarks differently. More than once, I found myself stopping mid-chapter to look up a river crossing, a cast-iron bridge, or an old stretch of road that still traces the spine of the early republic. The National Road was America's first federally funded highway, authorized by Congress in 1806 and begun at Cumberland, Maryland, in 1811. It eventually pushed west through the Appalachians and across much of what was then the American frontier.

Crytzer brings the National Road to life. You see surveyors pushing through forests, workers laying stone, travelers in stagecoaches heading west with everything they own. The book makes a simple case, and it makes it well: The republic needed this road — and more importantly, the idea that led to the road's creation — if it was going to hold together. "It was the first example of interstate cooperation, the first interstate highway, the first project to unite the East and West," Crytzer writes. "It was the original connection between the continent's most vital watersheds."

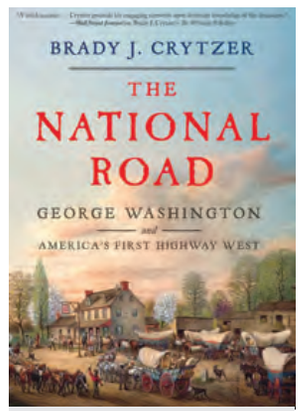
For George Washington, it was a lifelong passion he hoped to leave to the nation he founded. But he would never see the National Road itself. Washington died in 1799. The road was the posthumous realization of a vision he had carried for much of his adult life.

Crytzer reintroduces Washington to us in a very fresh way. We know Washington: the general, the president, the father of his country. Crytzer gives us a rare glimpse of Washington the surveyor, the young man who walked the frontier, measured land, and saw with unusual clarity how the continent's vast geography, and the conquest of its space, would shape the fate of the new United States.

The idea of linking the Potomac River to the Ohio River was not new for President Washington. The notion had been formed decades earlier, when Washington was a young man surveying the territory and building the road for Braddock's disastrous campaign during the French and Indian War. As Crytzer writes:

"Whether he marched as an agent of Virginia, of the British Empire, or of a sovereign United States, he always reached the same conclusion: The future was in the west, and the Ohio River was critical to controlling the North American continent. He saw it as a major in the Virginia militia, and then again as a colonel; in both instances he marked it as the most strategic military target in the west. He later returned as a speculator, an entrepreneur operating in the name of profit, not empire."

And, of course, he remembered his observations when he became president. A national road, in Washington's mind, was not about convenience and only partly for commerce. It was about cohesion in a new nation that had very little of it, particularly in the East and West, following the aftermath of the Whiskey Rebellion. Crytzer shows how Washington's aim for the National Road was carried forward by two of the early republic's most consequential figures; Albert Gallatin, the Swiss-born treasury secretary who served under Presidents Thomas Jefferson and James Madison; and Henry Clay, the Kentucky statesman who won the House speakership in 1811 and spent the next four decades as one of the nation's foremost champions of federally supported roads and canals.



The National Road: George Washington and America's First Highway West
By Brady J. Crytzer
Diversion Books
368 pp.; $32.50

Gallatin is not remembered by the general public as he should be. In Crytzer's account, he emerges as the figure who carried Washington's vision forward. The immigrant from Geneva understood the problem clearly: Settlement without connection leads to isolation, and isolation to grievance. If the West could not move goods east, it would look elsewhere. Binding it to the union required more than rhetoric. It required roads, trade, and the steady movement of people and goods. That meant funding, and Crytzer shows how Gallatin used the Treasury to keep the project moving when it might otherwise have stalled.

While Gallatin translated Washington's idea into fiscal reality, Clay extended it into a coherent national program. As speaker of the House for much of the period between 1811 and 1825, Clay occupied one of the most powerful positions in the federal government, and he used it to champion what became known as the American System. Like the first president, Clay understood that roads and canals were never just economic tools — they were political glue. By physically linking distant Americans, the National Road would tighten the bonds of the union itself. Roads had equally important indirect effects on institution-building. Supply routes became mail routes, and mail routes became the early republic's communications network, the nervous system that helped knit a shared culture even as the nation began to break over the issue of slavery.

The real hero of the story is not Washington, Gallatin, or Clay, but the Army Corps of Engineers. They were hardly romantic about the purpose of the National Road. Where the statesmen saw destiny, they saw grades and drainage. They worked with transits and compasses, survey chains and expense ledgers, and understood what it took to put a road on the ground. In a young republic that often could not agree on much, the corps quietly pushed road-building into new territory. Crytzer argues they were among the most innovative road- and bridge-builders since the Romans. When the politicians moved on to the next debate, the corps was still in the mud, still arguing about which way to construct the road around a bend.

What strikes you, finishing the book, is how conventional the road must have seemed to the people who traveled it. It was just a road. Muddy in spring, rutted and bumpy by summer, impassable in bad winters. They couldn't see what it was doing: binding markets, pulling settlements into the orbit of the republic, ensuring the West remained American rather than transforming into something else entirely. That's often how it works with the things that hold us together. You only see them clearly once someone makes you look. Next time you're driving on U.S. Route 40, particularly east of Ohio, be sure to stop to read the plaques.

Carl Paulus is a political historian from Michigan who formerly worked on Capitol Hill.

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FILM

Wokeness Is the Real Threat on Oak Street

By Peter Tonguette

The End of Oak Street may seem like a harmless, companionable, feel-good potpourri made up of parts from *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), *Jurassic Park* (1993), and *Jumanji* (1995), but it is, without question, one of the most cynical movies of the year.

The movie tells of a time warp that admits dinosaurs to a suburban enclave in the early 1980s, and writer-director David Robert Mitchell means to lure audiences into the theater with the promise that it will traffic in nostalgia for that terrific time and milieu. After all, the popularity of 1980s-set movies and shows proves that a significant portion of the population wishes to live in a world in which Walkman cassette players are in wide use and Pizza Hut restaurants everywhere are outfitted with buffets.

The End of Oak Street wants to capture this demographic. But recreating an era, as the movie does reasonably well, is not the same thing as expressing real affection for it. Despite embellishing his movie with period-accurate clothes, decor, and music, Mitchell has no deep attachment to the period at all. He means to sell tickets by putting Pat Benatar's "Hit Me With Your Best Shot" on the soundtrack, but he has no intention of ratifying the actual manners and mores that governed the 1980s, which was, after all, "morning in America" — not the sort of era likely to be commemorated by Hollywood, and it isn't here.

The film stars Ewan McGregor and Anne Hathaway as Greg and Denise Platt, who, along with their children Audrey (Maisy Stella) and Brian (Christian Convery), are among the inhabitants of Oak Street. One thing the film cannot be faulted for is its picture-perfect evocation of the ranch and split-level houses whose low rooflines remain an ideal visual signifier of the time. Equally resonant is the end-of-summer neighborhood block party that kicks off the movie: potato sack races, Formica tables with food spreads, the constant din of rock music and locusts — it feels downright cozy, as well it should.

Yet, having lulled us into a state of reminiscence, Mitchell — best known for the faddish, overpraised genre movies *It Follows* (2014) and *Under the Silver Lake* (2018) — wants to compli-

Ewan McGregor, Christian Convery, Maisy Stella, and Anne Hathaway in *The End of Oak Street*.

COURTESY OF WARNER BROS.

cate, if not annihilate, our yearning. He accomplishes this not by dinosaurs, though, but by wokeness. For starters, Greg and Denise are discontent in their marriage — or, to put it more sharply, Denise is discontent in *her* marriage. McGregor plays Greg — a laid-off, evidently middle-class worker who has turned to pizza delivery driving — as a human doormat who absorbs his wife's frequent, feminist-tinged expressions of annoyance and dissatisfaction. Thoroughly unimpressed by her suburban idyll, and evidently unmoved by her responsibilities as wife and mother, Denise labors in her basement on a novel whose protagonist wishes to forsake her family for a life in New York. (These were the days when New York was a publishing capital, not the chief example of electoral success by a member of the Democratic Socialists of America.)

What is objectionable is not that the film portrays a strained family unit — after all, the mother in *E.T.* had been through a divorce, though she was plainly the victim in the split — but that it presents Denise's frustrations through a kind of "women's lib" lens as completely at odds with the family values ethos of the era. One might assume that once the dinosaurs make their presence known, the family unit would reset along traditional lines, but no: in the film's woke terms, Denise, not Greg, is the one who takes command of the brood and does most of the battling with the dinos.

Admittedly, Mitchell is fairly creative in sketching the run-up to the dinosaur takeover, which includes ominous signs such as long-extinct plant life taking root overnight. And the filmmaker wrings some genuine thrills when he deposits the creatures among fenced, Radio Flyer-strewn backyards and such. Although when seen up close or for prolonged periods, the digital dinos are remarkably bland and unimpressive — I was reminded of the notoriously bad CGI in the woeful Ray Bradbury movie *A Sound of Thunder* (2005).

Yet, in contending with the invading species, Denise is fashioned into a female action hero more in keeping with the epoch of director Quentin Tarantino than with that of President Ronald Reagan. "I can handle anything you can handle — maybe more," she tells her husband, pointedly. Note that Denise is the parent who arms herself with a rifle and first shoots a dinosaur while Greg ambles around with a baseball bat. Note, too, that Denise is the parent behind the wheel of their car as the family fruitlessly tries to flee their street. And further note (spoiler alert) that Greg is the parent who is apparently maimed and killed. This is *Jurassic Park* gone woke.

Speaking as someone born in 1983 — the year after the film is set — I simply do not believe that a majority of American fathers at the time were as feeble as Greg, nor that a majority of American mothers were itching to become reptile-slaying mercenaries like Denise. To top it off, Mitchell is not content to let the defeat of the dinosaurs close the film but must also show the fulfillment of Denise's writerly ambitions: she has managed to get a book about the experience published. Greg, presumably, is living off the royalties. This is not a story about vanquishing the T. Rex; it's a study in how Denise became a girl boss.

Because the film is so anachronistic on a deep level, its surface anachronisms start to merit attention. For example, my ears hurt when Greg's pizza delivery job was referred to as a "side gig," a term I am certain I never heard during my six years of living in the 1980s. Speaking of which: When Greg is seen delivering a pizza in the pouring rain (a portent of the dinosaurs' arrival), why is he not wearing a jacket? And why is the pie he is delivering not being kept in one of those insulated pizza delivery bags? Is he really that dumb? When the power goes out at night, why does Denise emerge from the basement (where, of course, she has been typing) with a gigantic lit candle? Is it her practice to keep candles and matches with her in the basement — you know, in the event of a mass, dinosaur-induced power failure? But as far as inexplicable character behavior, this has nothing on the scene in which Denise cajoles Greg into letting her take his picture in front of mating dinosaurs. It is difficult to know whether the movie is meant to be scary (which it sometimes is) or is intended as camp (at which it fails).

The real end of Oak Street comes not from the feet and chompers of the dinosaurs but from a moviemaker who revives the idyllic 1980s only to desecrate them with wokeness.

Peter Tonguette is the Life & Arts editor of the Washington Examiner *magazine.*

ON CULTURE

The WASPs' Last Sigh

By Will Collins

The best indicator of the waning influence of the WASP is that most people no longer know who the term refers to.

Stripped to its barest terms, "white Anglo-Saxon Protestant" could mean anyone from an Appalachian bootlegger to a recently naturalized citizen who grew up in the Cotswolds. But these disparate figures, while white, of Anglo-Saxon descent, and notionally Protestant, are not members of the club. The most concise and useful definition comes from the WASP-adjacent writer and new *60 Minutes* correspondent Ross Douthat in a 2018 column occasioned by the death of President George H.W. Bush: "The term properly refers to a specific kind of American elite, mostly from the Northeast, mostly high-church Protestants, concentrated in a few cities (Boston, Philadelphia, New York, plus some Midwestern and Californian outposts), generally associated with the Republican Party (with occasional defectors like F.D.R.), who dominated a particular set of fields (academia, finance, foreign policy) and shared the code of service and piety and manners that defined the elder Bush's career."

Bush's class was incubated in the American Northeast, but it was not dominant in the early decades of the republic. Instead, the WASPs' Yankee predecessors were a regional elite who had to contend with other sectional interests. If any group came close to emulating the Roman model of a hereditary and deeply entrenched Republican aristocracy, it was the planters of Virginia, who supplied four of America's first five presidents.

Despite its growing industrial and commercial weight, the Northeast lost as many political battles as it won during the Antebellum era, failing to permanently establish a national bank, avert a war with Mexico, or prevent the westward extension of slavery. But the Civil War permanently changed America's regional balance of power. The Union won thanks in large part to the industrial,

financial, and manpower sinews of the Northeast.

The so-called "Eastern Establishment" that emerged from the wreckage of the Civil War was more haute bourgeois than aristocratic. The most perceptive description of this milieu comes from the novelist Edith Wharton, herself a product of New York's high society. In her 1920 novel *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton neatly skewered the aristocratic pretensions of the city's leading families through the mouth of a society matron:

> *"Don't tell me," Mrs. Archer would say to her children, "all this modern newspaper rubbish about a New York aristocracy. ... Our grandfathers and great-grandfathers were just respectable English or Dutch merchants, who came to the colonies to make their fortune, and stayed here because they did so well."*

The WASPs are often compared to the British aristocracy, and from their mannerisms to their boarding schools, there is a familial resemblance. But British aristocrats groomed their sons for military service and political leadership, two professions the WASPs generally avoided. When a young Theodore Roosevelt decided to run for a seat in the New York State Assembly, the reaction among his peers ranged from bemused wonder to total bafflement. As an assemblyman, Roosevelt rubbed shoulders with Irish ward bosses and machine politicians, not fellow Harvard alumni. To the WASPs, politics was a dirty business — better to pursue a respectable career in law, finance, or industry than to sully yourself with grubby electioneering, notwithstanding Roosevelt's meteoric political rise, and his fifth cousin Franklin's later career.

The military is another profession that never held much appeal to the WASP elite. Even after the Civil War, the institution was dominated by Southerners and career officers from military families. When Theodore Roosevelt, always the maverick, raised a regiment of volunteers to fight in the Spanish-American War, his commanding officer was Joseph Wheeler, a former Confederate cavalry general who kept referring to the Spaniards as "Yankees." It's not that the WASPs were reluctant to enlist when called upon — the chapels of Yale and Harvard are inscribed with alumni who fell in the World Wars. Career military service, however, was not their metier.

The WASPs had other paths to power, though power, as such, was not an end but a means. As American capitalism matured and railroad barons erected libraries and sent their sons to prep schools, an identifiable WASP ethos of public service developed. E.H. Harriman built railroads — his son, Averell Harriman, went to Groton and Yale and helped build the post-World War II international order.

As this sensibility matured, the Eastern Establishment extended its tentacles outside the Yankee heartland. Stanford University was founded in 1885 as California's answer to Cornell. T.S. Eliot came from a Boston Brahmin family that had relocated to St. Louis. Virginia-born Woodrow Wilson and Minnesota-born F. Scott Fitzgerald were both educated at Princeton. It is impossible not to see the imprimatur of this WASPy bastion on their later careers, from Wilson's paternalistic brand of progressivism to Fitzgerald's creation Jay Gatsby, who changed his name from "Gatz" and affected an Ivy League pedigree.

After the end of World War II, Averell Harriman famously remarked that Americans only wanted to "go to the movies and drink Coke," but he and a few other figures were determined not to repeat the mistakes of World War I. The intellectual justification for anti-Soviet containment was first laid out by Princeton-educated George F. Kennan, who, along with Harriman, became one of the so-called "Wise Men." The Marshall Plan that rebuilt Western Europe was conceptualized and implemented by the same clique.

Even critics of the Eastern Establishment can appreciate the enormity of these postwar achievements. In an otherwise acerbic 2019 *Harper's* essay on the WASP legacy, the left-wing economist Doug Henwood admitted as much: "It must be conceded that they had a pretty good run, designing a relatively stable international order steered from Washington, which endured for decades."

Ruling classes decline when their power base erodes and they lose legitimacy in the eyes of the ruled. Rome's evolution from an Italian city-state to a Mediterranean empire coincided with a shift in political power from the landed nobility to wealthy plutocrats and generals who could command the loyalty of armies. Civil wars and endemic public disorder delegitimized the old system. The figures we associate with the Roman Empire at its height — Trajan, Hadrian, Marcus Aurelius — were drawn from the empire's provincial landowning class, hungry outsiders with no ties to the old elite.

Something similar happened to the WASPs in the second half of the 20th century. America's economic center of gravity shifted from the Northeast to the West and the Sun Belt. The Ivy League, Wall Street, the CIA, and corporate America opened their doors to talented newcomers from all backgrounds.

E. Digby Baltzell, the academic who originally popularized the term "WASP," argued that, by the 1960s, the Eastern Establishment had become too snobby, too precious about going to the right schools and summering in the right zip codes, and too closed off to new talent. An alternative explanation is that the upheavals of the 1960s and the wider crisis of confidence they inspired reached the inner circles of the establishment, delegitimizing the very idea of grooming a narrow, privileged elite for leadership. The Carter administration's behind-the-scenes struggle between Polish-born national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski and Cyrus Vance, the Connecticut prep school- and Yale-educated secretary of state, is emblematic of this shift.

By the 1980s, the country had changed so dramatically that the WASPs were becoming a folk memory: fodder for Hollywood villains, style advice from *The Official Preppy Handbook*, or the character of Sherman McCoy in Tom Wolfe's novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, an insecure Wall Street trader ashamed that he might be related to someone from Kentucky. The failed reelection campaign of Bush, a Connecticut Yankee who never found the common touch, was another sign of the times. In a more democratic, media-saturated age, the Eastern Establishment's aversion to electoral politics and preference for behind-the-scenes maneuvers had become major liabilities.

Bush's son, George W. Bush, moved to Texas, became an oilman, and adopted a cowboy persona to reclaim the presidency for his family. Older brother Jeb

Then-candidate for vice president, George H.W. Bush sits with his dog, Fred, in front of his home in Kennebunkport, Maine, in September 1980

CYNTHIA JOHNSON/LIAISON/GETTY IMAGES

moved to Florida, married a Hispanic woman, and converted to Catholicism, only to lose the 2016 Republican presidential primary to Donald Trump, the boastful, vulgar antithesis of everything the old establishment once stood for. In an appropriate bookend, Trump's great first-term antagonist was Robert Mueller III, whose buttoned-up public persona and WASPy style seemed relics from an older era. Naturally, Mueller never did get his man.

Unlike the nobiles of Ancient Rome, the WASPs didn't decline because of incompetence or misrule. Instead, they were victims of their own success. From exclusive prep schools to Harvard to the civil service, the institutions they once dominated, and, in many cases, built from the ground up, worked so well that outsiders insisted on getting in on the action.

Our current political climate could use a hearty dose of the old virtues. One bitter irony is that Ivy League secret societies and exclusive organizations such as the Council on Foreign Relations or the infamous Bohemian Grove were often fodder for conspiracy theories about sex parties, bizarre pagan rituals, and other hidden crimes. Yet the Epstein files, which have revealed an elite class that is every bit as insular as that of the WASPs, minus its sense of duty or proper conduct, suggest that the old codes were much better at regulating the behavior of the rich and powerful.

The Republican Party was once a vehicle for the establishment, but the country-club set has been thoroughly routed by a wave of Trump-inflected politicians and influencers. But this new generation has forgotten one of the old guard's cardinal rules: Discretion and self-restraint make elites more palatable to the broader public. There was a practical reason that flaunting your wealth was considered bad form: It invites anger, resentment, jealousy, and accusations of self-dealing. Trump's political success is often credited to his showman qualities, but he has never put together a truly dominant electoral win, and underlings who try to ape Trump's over-the-top theatrics have met with even less success.

At first glance, the technocrats of the modern American Left seem to be the WASPs' natural inheritors, having taken over the charitable foundations, government agencies, and universities that once belonged to the Eastern Establishment. But the Left seems embarrassed by the very idea of patriotic public service. The great achievements of the postwar American order, from the Marshall Plan to the establishment of NATO, were inspired not just by noblesse oblige but by a sincere belief in advancing American interests.

Today, your average Ivy League undergraduate is more likely to wear sweatpants than loafers and more familiar with the language of social justice than the *Social Register*. Sometimes, you don't know what you've got until it's gone.

Will Collins is a lecturer at Eotvos Lorand University in Budapest, Hungary.

Emmy Rossum and Quincy Tyler Bernstine in *Furious*.

SARAH SHATZ/COURTESY OF DISNEY

TV

Righteous Wrath Filmed with Panache

By Graham Hillard

A small moment in Hulu's riveting new series *Furious* reveals the depth of the show's preoccupation with female revenge. Investigating a crime scene with an officer who is also her abusive former boyfriend, FBI agent Alice Black (Emmy Rossum) secures a pair of blood-stained scissors and hands them over to her ex. Yet, just for an instant, we see something darker in her expression. She'd clearly prefer to stab him in his guilt-ridden face.

The harm men do to women — and that women do back to them — is the dominant theme of Hulu's eight-part production, now streaming weekly following its premiere in late July. Alice, an FBI rookie who once worked for the New York City Police Department, has been called in to investigate a homicide disguised as a drug overdose. The dead man was the son of a prominent billionaire. Could his new girlfriend, strangely absent from neighborhood security footage, be to blame?

That young woman, played by a startlingly good Lola Petticrew (*Say Nothing*), goes by many names over the course of the series but is billed as Catherine Grace. A former victim of child sex trafficking, Catherine has developed a murderous modus operandi: track down, seduce, and poison the men responsible for her ill treatment. Through the first four episodes alone, at least as many bodies pile up, killed or left for dead by a woman who invites explicit comparison to the mythological sufferer Medusa. "She's a victim," one fed says of our lethal antiheroine, "but it doesn't make her a good person. It turns her into a monster."

Furious is, on its surface, a simple cat-and-mouse thriller of the kind regularly produced for big and small screens. But the show is also a character study of greater-than-usual sophistication — a worthy heir to its most famous forerunner, the Oscar-winning film version of *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). A pitiless scourge of the Epstein class, Catherine is also a compassionate nurse to Alden (Steve Way), a muscular dystrophy patient for whom she works as a home healthcare aide. Alice, for her part, is nearly as fascinating as Jodie Foster's iconic Clarice Starling. Having survived a childhood not entirely unlike that of the woman whom she pursues, the young agent is similarly contradictory and fierce.

The show's supporting players inhabit a layered headspace of their own. NYPD detective Marshall Connelly (Jake Lacy), the aforementioned bad ex, is plainly a villain but is just as visibly consumed with regret. Though we wish she could, it is no affront to believability that Alice can't make herself stop loving him. Also intriguing is Scoot McNairy (*Halt* and *Catch Fire*) as Detective Danny Kelly, a once-close friend torn between rescuing Alice and abandoning her to her folly. Best of all is journeywoman Quincy Tyler Bernstine, who gives an award-worthy performance as Nora Washington, Alice's wise and funny FBI mentor. Asked by our protagonist to account for her erudition, Nora serves up the quip of the series: "I'm not a former cop, I went to a fancy school, and I'm very smart." Trust me, the moment comes off as endearing rather than smug.

Furious needs its lighter scenes to deliver us from what could otherwise be an oppressive tone. Even with them, the series is not for the faint of heart. Note, for instance, the brutality with which Catherine dispatches an abuse-enabling lawyer played by Campbell Scott. What separates the show from lesser efforts is that it is too intelligent to allow its emotional palette to fade entirely to gray. Yes, the series is often violent, but it is also clever, surprising, amusing, and oddly sweet.

Created by veteran showrunner Elizabeth Meriwether (*New Girl*), *Furious* is loosely based on Bob Rafelson's 1987 neo-noir thriller *Black Widow*, in which Debra Winger's Justice Department analyst pursues Theresa Russell's serial killer of men. As befits its era, that film assigns Russell's character no motive beyond a love of money. She wants

it, and her victims have it. *Furious*, no less a representative of our own age, is unable to fathom female violence except as an outgrowth of righteous wrath. A line from Nora gives away the game: "Obviously any woman who becomes a serial killer is a victim of something." Obviously? They should have told that to Rafelson, the *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) auteur who died in 2022, whose near-perfect picture spends a drum-tight 102 minutes demonstrating the opposite.

Ah, but we would have better luck spitting into the wind than denouncing a television show for its concessions to vogue anxieties. Coming in 2050: a Catherine who kills male-featured anthropomorphic bots. The miracle of *Furious* is that it succeeds despite its paternalistic treatment of the fairer sex — despite, for that matter, stretching Rafelson's taut tale to a now-standard six hours and change. The show's writing and pacing are simply too good to be brought low. And one would have to go back to the 1980s-era police procedural *Cagney & Lacey* to find two overlapping female performances this strong. Tyne Daly and Sharon Gless, winners between them of six Lead Actress Emmys in a row, may finally have met their match.

It is difficult to overstate how effective *Furious*'s two stars are in this production. Having wasted her youth on Showtime's execrable satire *Shameless* (2011-2021), Rossum now establishes herself as a masterful portrayer of psychological weakness and strength. Her Alice is a hypnotically self-destructive figure. Petticrew, meanwhile, builds on her much-praised work in *Say Nothing*, Hulu's 2024 Irish Republican Army drama based on a book by Patrick Radden Keefe. As she did on that show, the young woman gives an utterly fearless performance as an ingenue pushed by circumstances to the emotional brink.

But perhaps even I am now letting Catherine off the hook. The character is, after all, irredeemably wicked, never mind the arguably more outrageous evils that men have done to her. Looked at a certain way, the figure of Catherine exists to show us the person whom Alice might herself have become. Except Alice doesn't. Take that as the show's most important lesson. We always have a choice.

Graham Hillard is the TV critic for the Washington Examiner *magazine.*

LIFE IN UNIFORM

In It Up to Their Necks

By Trent Reedy

Awhile back, I told you about Staff Sgt. Tyler Clabaugh, with whom I served in the Afghanistan War. He was a great soldier, especially when things went wrong and he and his squad were in danger.

Sgt. Clabaugh was in charge of the security for a convoy of two Humvees and two Toyota Hilux pickups, on a run with Civil Affairs soldiers to meet with Afghan leaders in a western Afghan village.

Clabaugh was riding up front in the lead Humvee, a brand-new, state-of-the-art armored vehicle. It had an early version of the cool armor nest to help protect the gunner on the roof. It was equipped with all the latest improvised explosive devices signal-jamming equipment. The rig had less than 500 miles on it. I bet the air conditioner still worked.

Most of the roads in Afghanistan are dirt, and there are few bridges. We all drove through many shallow rivers throughout the deployment. Nobody thought that much about it. That March, Clabaugh's convoy approached a swollen river, with several small side creeks running beside it. They radioed the rest of the convoy to pay attention and follow their route exactly.

After struggling through several streams, Clabaugh's driver, Sgt. Bryers, almost had the Humvee stuck. They needed to power through the next part if they were to escape the mud.

"Let her buck!" Clabaugh shouted. The Humvee drove 6 feet out into the river. Then it plunged 6 feet straight down. The water was right up to the roof, gushing in, rising 3 inches a second. "Get the f*** out!" Clabaugh continued.

All four seats were occupied, and a gunner stood in the middle. All had to flee through the gunner's roof hatch. Clabaugh's top concern was for his men. In full gear, including heavy body armor, they faced a real drowning risk.

Sgt. Cain, in the back seat, refused to exit before Clabaugh. No time to argue. Clabaugh hurried topside and then pulled Cain out.

The freezing water was blazing fast. The Humvee had been perpendicular to the flow. "In ... a few hours, the current had pushed that motherf***er so the nose was facing downstream," Clabaugh told me.

He and the four others jumped to shore. Now they faced another problem. They couldn't leave the Humvee and equipment behind. They were stuck in an open area, tempting targets for the Taliban.

Clabaugh called back to base on a satellite telephone, asking for help and notifying command of their position.

"Why are you giving a grid location on an unsecure line?" an officer asked.

"Because our tac radios are underwater," Clabaugh answered.

Command would send the quick reaction force with a truck to pull out the Humvee. It was 10 a.m.

Talking about it with Sgt. Clabaugh, even 21 years later, I could hear a deep concern for his men in his voice.

He began working to establish a security perimeter. While setting that up, he heard a four-second burst from an M249 SAW machine gun. There was no enemy. It was the aged and often panicked Sgt. 1st Class Feldsrum, test-firing the SAW.

Nobody in the Army test-fired weapons, least of all when doing so could compromise a unit's position.

"You will not fire that f***ing thing unless there's a need!" Clabaugh shouted.

QRF arrived at 5 in the evening, with Afghan National Army troops. In the morning, they extracted the sunken vehicle and towed it back to base.

"I always think about it," Clabaugh told me. "If something would have actually happened that day, and people would have lost their lives, I don't know how I'd live with it."

Yeah, the Humvee and the mission sank fast. A lot of good men were in danger. But Clabaugh reacted instantly,

taking the necessary leadership actions to bring everyone home safely. A potential disaster was turned into a successful failure by Staff Sgt. Tyler Clabaugh and some other fantastic soldiers.

Trent Reedy, author of several books including Enduring Freedom*, served as a combat engineer in the Iowa Army National Guard from 1999 to 2005, including a tour of duty in Afghanistan. *Some names and call signs in this story may have been changed due to operational security or privacy concerns.*

LONG LIFE

Even for a Pretentious Traveler, America Still Does Most Things Right

By Rob Long

Last week, on a Zoom call with some colleagues, I told the group that I have been traveling around Europe and the Caucasus since May. One of my colleagues responded with a flattering shout. *Wow!* she said. *You're not just a tourist, you're a traveler!* Which was gratifying, of course, but also made a complicated distinction.

People who think of themselves as travelers are the kind who start measuring distances in kilometers and temperatures in Celsius before the plane even lands at Schiphol. And when it's hot, they fan themselves and sigh, wearily, "My God, it must be almost 35 degrees." When you get right down to it, the difference between a tourist and a traveler is probably just that the latter carries a pretentious, expensive notebook.

But I'm quibbling. Travel — whatever you want to call it — is one of life's great joys. What can be more pleasurable, or transformative, than visiting other places and cultures, seeing the world through very different eyes, taking part in richly unfamiliar experiences, meeting people who begin as strangers and develop into friends, and, especially, noticing all of the things weird foreign people do and eat and say that are incorrect and inefficient and that we do much better back in the United States?

This summer, for instance, I attended church services everywhere from London to Paris, Istanbul to Tbilisi, Athens to Rome to Tunis to Malta — a broad sampling of Christian expression across two continents — and at every single one, there came a moment when I thought to myself, "Huh. This is very nice, but they're doing it wrong."

This is a very Episcopalian thing, I should say. Not scorn. (Nothing so vulgar.) Just a gentle noticing — a mild, charitable awareness that the Georgian Orthodox Church, say, does a prayer kind of thing a certain way, a way they've been doing it for roughly 1,300 years longer than the American Episcopal Church has existed, followed by a private wondering whether they'd like to know the actually correct way to do it. I never said anything, of course. It's not my place to pull a foreign clergyman aside and say, *Hey, Padre, I have a fix for that thing you're doing that doesn't work.*

I don't want to give you the wrong impression. The summer wasn't all me, in churches, making lists of theological and liturgical errors in my $250 notebook. I wasn't spending all of my time noticing that foreigners do church wrong. I noticed that they also do ice cream wrong, too.

Here's what I mean: When you buy ice cream in Europe — which, this summer, with temperatures hitting 40 degrees Celsius, you will — they do this weird and annoying thing, especially in Italy. You go first to the lady at the cash register, where you order your ice cream size and delivery device. "How many balls?" she might ask. "In a small carton or a *cono*?" Then you get a little receipt, which you present to a *second* person behind the array of ice creams, who handles the flavor-choice phase of the operation. None of this makes any sense, and on a hot afternoon, you'll find crowds of (mostly) American tourists cheerfully baffled by this quintessentially European extra layer of bureaucratic intervention into the summer ice cream cone.

Until you realize — or, more likely, until a local friend explains it to you, condescendingly — that it's a lot more hygienic this way. One person handles all the grubby, sneeze-and-God-knows-what-else-encrusted bills. Another person, with pristine hands, does the food manipulation, and eventually hands you your *cono*. The system I had privately diagnosed as inefficient turned out to be smarter than the one back home, where a pierced-everywhere teenager takes your cash and then builds your sundae with the same 10 fingers he or she used to count all of the ways his or her parents are totally toxic.

So I had to admit: I got the ice cream "mistake" backward. Which made me wonder, licking my hygienically served *stracciatella* balls in the shade, what else I'd gotten wrong. Maybe the Georgians, who have had 1,300 extra years to work out the kinks, were doing it right? Maybe I could say the same about the church services I attended in Malta, Athens, and North Africa? But as I finished my ice cream, I realized that these were impossible questions to answer. Those church services were conducted in languages that I do not speak or understand, and that, I think, is what they're really doing wrong.

Rob Long is a television writer and producer, including as screenwriter and executive producer on Cheers*, and he is the co-founder of Ricochet.com.*

BENSON

Hasan Piker dares Democrats to defend him

One of the most in-demand campaign surrogates on the Democratic Socialists of America-aligned Left these days is a communist, pro-terrorism streamer named Hasan Piker. If that description feels uncharitable or hyperbolic, read on.

"Democrats, listen to me, I know we don't always see eye to eye on a lot of stuff, but you have to literally, at some point — I know you don't want to do this — defend me," he insisted last week.

He went on, urging Democrats to back him up, "not because you love what I have to say, not because I'm part of this coalition, even though I am, whether you like it or not, but you are going to inevitably have to say, 'This is a ridiculous conversation that we're having'... That requires you to basically take the L a little bit and maybe be a bit more honest about how I'm not this dangerous, toxic radical force."

If Democrats accede to his demands, what will they be forced to defend? Let's review.

Piker infamously said that America deserved 9/11, the terrorist attacks in which jihadis murdered nearly 3,000 innocent people in 2001. One of his favorite candidates, Michigan's extremist Democratic Senate nominee Abdul el Sayed, dismissed this comment as merely "dumb."

Various lefty media figures have also argued that it was taken "out of context," that Piker was "joking," or that Piker was trying to make a different point. Facing intense opprobrium and bans, Piker himself tried to claim that he hadn't really meant what he said.

Was this quote just a "dumb" misstatement? Is it being taken out of context? Did he not really mean it when it came out of his mouth? Was he "joking"? Watch the clip.

An angry Piker flatly asserts that the United States deserved what it got in that heinous atrocity. He knew it was going to be controversial, then made a big show of saying it anyway.

Quote: "America deserved 9/11, dude. F*** it, I'm saying it... We — we f***ing totally brought it on ourselves dude. Holy s***. We did. We f***ing did."

What was the precious "context" in which he unleashed this vile tirade? He was attacking former Texas Rep. Dan Crenshaw, a Purple Heart recipient.

This is how Piker talked about Crenshaw's war wounds: "Didn't [Crenshaw] go to war and like literally lose his eye because some mujahideen — a brave f***ing soldier — f***ed his eye hole with their d***?"

Notice Piker's characterization of the terrorist who shot out our soldier's eye as a "mujahideen" and "brave f***ing soldier." He's not referring to Crenshaw — he's referring to the terrorist who wounded Crenshaw.

The notion that any of this is a "joke" or "out of context" is nonsense. He meant it, passionately and angrily.

He's also stated pro-terrorist sentiments on quite a few other occasions, discrediting any suggestion that he wasn't being genuine. Piker has unequivocally said that he supports the butchers of Hamas over Israel (not vague "Palestinians," but explicitly Hamas), and expressed that he doesn't care "if" Hamas committed rapes, in addition to their mass murder on Oct. 7, 2023.

He volunteered that his favorite flag in the world is that of Hezbollah, a designated Islamist terrorist organization responsible for the murders of hundreds of Americans.

Does any of this sound like a man who was using out-of-context, insincere "humor" when he shouted his profane diatribe about America deserving the worst terrorist attack in our history? Defend this, he tells his party.

Piker is proud of his lack of pride in America, saying as much while on a pilgrimage to Communist China, and calling the USA a terrorist country.

Having devoted endless energy to amplifying the "Israeli genocide" lie and smear, Piker makes no secret of his profound admiration for a longtime Chinese Communist Party dictator who is responsible for tens of millions of deaths.

"Mao Zedong is one of the great leaders of this world... Mao Zedong gets the same level of credit that the founding fathers do... [but] Mao Zedong, unlike George Washington, did not own slaves," Piker said.

Chairman Mao is one of history's greatest monsters. He caused the deaths of tens of millions of human beings, yet Piker praises him to the hilt, demonizing George Washington by comparison.

In response to anti-communist comments from a female Vietnamese victim of that ideology, Piker blew his top. "Yo, f*** this refugee," he said, urging her to leave America, informing her that America is worse, and telling her to "suck my d***."

His parting words for this woman, who justifiably loathes his evil totalitarian ideology: "Shut the f*** up, you stupid, f***ing idiotic old lady."

Defend this, he tells his party.

Piker, unsurprisingly, also seems to be a fan of political violence. He mused about the assassination of Sen. Rick Scott (R-FL), ranting that "if you cared about Medicare fraud or Medicaid fraud, you would kill Rick Scott."

Defend this, he tells his party.

That many Democrats and affiliated figures are, in fact, defending this disgusting cretin is a disgrace. But that's their choice to make — after all, he is a prominent and influential member of their coalition, as he's pointed out.

If they decide to debase themselves in doing so, they must be forced to do so based on the realities of what he's said and espoused, about which he's been revoltingly clear.

They can make excuses for him or embrace him if they'd like. But they cannot be permitted to lie about who he is. ★

Guy Benson is a senior columnist for the *Washington Examiner*.

GREEN
After Arday

In Britain, the death of the fraudulent University of Cambridge professor Jason Arday has triggered the kind of networked hysteria not seen on the Left since the death of George Floyd in 2020. Arday, once the youngest black professor at Cambridge, was found dead on Aug. 14 after a cascade of revelations exposed him as a fake and a plagiarist. On Aug. 18, thousands of people gathered in London's Trafalgar Square to mourn him. The speakers accused the press of an "assassination" and a "lynching," and called for punitive regulation of Britain's already punitively regulated media.

This was the real-world tip of an online iceberg of resentment and delusion. The most titanic contribution came from the minor novelist Will Self. In a 7,000-word rant, Self compared half a dozen other commentators, me among them, to members of Nazi death squads and the persecutors of Alfred Dreyfus, and called on Prime Minister Andy Burnham to instruct the police to launch a murder investigation and impound our computers. My name, and those of others who described Arday's unarguable falsity, now circulate on online lists of targets for retribution.

Call me a cuck and a lib, but I've always felt that everyone is free to say what we believe, especially on matters of public interest. As for writers, those of us who are vain and idle enough to mount the soapbox have a duty to tell it like it is. Scapegoating, censorship, and show trials are the hallmarks of police states. When these impulses appear in a liberal state, as in the McCarthy witch hunt, the prosecution of Lenny Bruce for telling rude jokes, or the imprisonment of British people for posting spicy memes, it is a sure sign that the state is losing its grip, whether on the legal machinery that is supposed to be kept out of the grasp of sectarian fanatics or on reality itself.

Reality is becoming a luxury product, like burritos and beef. The difference is, we can digest burritos and beef, but, as T.S. Eliot said, "humankind cannot bear too much reality." The Left's reality-denying reaction to Arday's fall is a collective defense mechanism. The truth about Arday and the institutional patrons who promoted his lies means the death of the Left's ideals and ambitions. It discredits an ideology and the institutions that have bent towards its service. Why face the pale rider when you can shoot the messenger instead?

Arday's academic plagiarism was the least of his deceptions. He claimed that he ran 30 marathons in 35 days, nine of them with a fractured bone in his leg. He claimed that he raised a fortune for charity and dug wells in the favelas of Brazil. He claimed that he overcame diagnoses of childhood autism, dyslexia, and muting and, after learning to read and write at 18, researched and wrote a doctoral thesis six years later. He claimed to have had a brain tumor. He claimed that a masked racist threatened him with a knife in his Cambridge office, that he was a target of an "evil" international conspiracy to take down high-profile black men, and that racists had left a pig's head on his family's doorstep.

You might think that when a man claims to have hopped his way into the elite company of the world's top endurance runners and overcome autism by magic, journalists would do some elementary fact checks. The BBC has an entire division, BBC Verify, devoted to exposing "disinformation."

You might think that university professors, who are overwhelmed by a tide of cheating from their students, would pass an applicant's work through detection software or make a few phone calls to confirm his resume.

You might think that when a major publisher such as Simon & Schuster pays a seven-figure advance for his autobiography, they would check his extraordinary claims.

Yet the BBC and other left-wing media republished all of Arday's fictions as fact. Cambridge and several other universities hired him. Simon & Schuster issued his biography after his exposure. How appropriate that the blowback reaches all the way to Simon & Schuster in Midtown Manhattan. The Arday tale is familiar, an American tale told in an English accent.

Cambridge promoted and then dropped Arday like a "pump and dump" junk bond. To polish their DEI credentials, they boosted a fraud at the expense of more worthy candidates, not least black and brown ones, then extracted his resignation when they were busted. The only media malfeasance in his story is that left-wing outlets disseminated Arday's lies as truth, to impose their white liberal guilt-trip on the rest of us.

Elite institutions justify their status by producing high-quality and accurate information. They are caught colluding in the systemic subversion of reality. In a democracy, this is akin to arson in a gunpowder factory. Don't blame the firefighters. ★

Dominic Green is a *Washington Examiner* columnist and a fellow of the Royal Historical Society. Find him on X @drdominicgreen.

HANNAN

America is heading for bankruptcy

The story should be leading every bulletin. The national debt has just risen to $40 trillion.

That sum is unimaginable, for the same reason that intergalactic and subatomic distances are unimaginable. Our brains are not configured to compute on such scales. Perhaps for that reason, the breaking of the $40 trillion barrier has received less attention than it deserves.

So let me try, if not to contextualize the sum itself, at least to give you a sense of how it has grown. When Barack Obama left office in 2017, the debt stood at $19.95 trillion. That sum was abominable enough, and Republicans said so in no uncertain terms. The GOP program called it "an unprecedented legacy" for young Americans, and an "immoral" bequest. Mitt Romney memorably pointed out that Obama had borrowed more than all his White House predecessors put together.

Donald Trump was emphatic about the enormity of Obama's record. "Barack Obama has doubled our national debt. Doubled it."

That was in 2016. Where are we 10 years on? Well, it turns out that Trump has now borrowed more than all his White House predecessors put together, including Obama. Trump, one might say, has doubled our national debt. Doubled it.

Both men might plead mitigating circumstances. Obama could point to the banking crisis, Trump to the pandemic. But neither man was ultimately prepared to make the unpopular decisions, including on Medicare and Social Security, that would allow the federal government to live within its means again.

What does a $40 trillion debt mean in practice? In the end, it can mean only one of three things: tax rises, spending cuts, or inflation. Inflation is the preferred solution for Third World governments. As the value of a currency falls, so do its government's liabilities and so, too, do its people's savings. Inflation is thus a sneaky tax, a thief in the night that transfers wealth furtively from citizens to the state.

Inflation might be Trump's preference. It would chime with his complaints about an overvalued dollar. It would chime, too, with his Third World vibe: strongman government, colossal monuments, territorial expansionism, tariffs, a coterie of friends and family members getting rich.

With a debt of such magnitude, though, inflation will not be enough. The federal government cannot technically go bankrupt, because there is no higher authority to administer the bankruptcy. In practical terms, though, we should think of it like a bankruptcy. A lot of people who are owed money by the federal government are going to take a haircut, including bondholders and pensioners.

"My own country, the United Kingdom, coincidentally broke the £3 trillion national debt mark at the same moment that the United States broke through $40 trillion. In proportionate terms, the two debt levels are similar and, in both countries, no one seems to care."

When a company or a bank collapses, the priority is to get through the bankruptcy as quickly and painlessly as possible, incentivizing creditors to accept partial repayment rather than hold out and risk losing everything. The same principle should apply here, and it is going to be painful.

It would, of course, be a lot less painful if Americans were prepared to make cuts now. Curiously, though, the tea partiers who worked themselves into such a frenzy under Obama have almost completely vanished from the scene. Did they give up in despair because the debt got so big? Or was their entire movement, as lefties claimed at the time, just an anti-Obama protest that happened to alight on tax as a shorthand way of expressing discontent? Either way, in the absence of a fiscally conservative countermovement, all the pressure will be for particular congressmen to secure particular spending increases for particular constituents, right up until the moment when the money runs out.

To some degree, it is a global problem. My own country, the United Kingdom, coincidentally broke the £3 trillion national debt mark at the same moment that the United States broke through $40 trillion. In proportionate terms, the two debt levels are similar and, in both countries, no one seems to care. My theory is that the lockdown, with its accompanying furlough schemes and grants, convinced voters that there really was a magic money tree.

Still, as Ayn Rand observed, you can evade the consequences of your actions, but you cannot evade the consequences of evading the consequences. A reckoning is coming. As my biblical namesake Daniel put it to an earlier leader, "God hath numbered thy kingdom and finished it. Thou art weighed in the balances and art found wanting".

I was born in 1971, the year that the dollar stopped being backed by gold. In 52 of my 56 years on this earth, the federal government has spent more than it raised. Thou art weighed in the balances and art found wanting. ★

Daniel Hannan is a member of the House of Lords, and a former Conservative MEP.

CARNEY

Independence vs. democracy

Attorney General Todd Blanche went on the Sunday talk shows right after his confirmation and refused to pledge independence from President Donald Trump. This sounds corrupt to the media, but it makes sense to anyone who has read the Constitution. Blanche then assured America that Trump would never ask him to do anything inappropriate or corrupt. This is what a Trump appointee is expected to say, but it is laughable to anyone who knows Trump.

These two moments, both from Blanche's interview with NBC's Kristen Welker, highlight a problem at the root of our political dysfunction.

We want our public officials to be independent and apolitical, but *independent* often means *unaccountable*. We want the rule of law to outrank the decisions of men, but the foundation of American law — the U.S. Constitution — puts all law enforcement power in the hands of one man.

Finally, we want powers to be neatly separated and lines to be sharply drawn, but our fallen species can create only the imperfect City of Man, and not the perfectly just City of God.

Blanche, in brushing aside "independence," was invoking the unitary executive understanding of the Constitution.

This is a simple theory with clear textual grounding: "The executive Power shall be vested in a President of the United States of America." It's not vested in the President *and* the bureaucracy. It's not vested in the Cabinet. Executive power is vested in the president.

The Justice Department is part of the executive branch. Enforcing the law is clearly an *executive* function. DOJ's priorities are set by political figures, which is good insofar as you like democracy.

You could see the FBI and the attorney general, like a Treasury Department bureaucrat reviewing beer labels, as specialized appendages of the president.

But at the same time, we do want *some* independence from the executive branch, and especially in the DOJ. We want our bureaucrats to use their expertise and follow the rules, rather than the whims of the president.

We certainly don't want our prosecutors and the FBI becoming the goon squad to harass, persecute, and prosecute the president's enemies while protecting the president and his friends.

And so when Blanche says he'd follow the president's lead, he's got good constitutional footing. But when Welker suggested this would include abusing prosecutorial and investigative powers, she was just as well-grounded.

Trump directed his DOJ to go after all the prosecutors who went after Trump, including former FBI Director James Comey and New York Attorney General Letitia James (D). He sicced his DOJ on former President Barack Obama and Gov. Gavin Newsom (D-CA). In Trump's first term, he fired his first attorney general, Jeff Sessions, for not stopping a counterintelligence investigation that implicated him.

But while NBC News might not acknowledge this, the idea of an "independent attorney general" has not been a reality in a while. Obama called Attorney General Eric Holder his "wingman." President John F. Kennedy's attorney general was his brother.

One defining trait of the Trump era is taking things to their logical conclusions: *If former President Bill Clinton is fine, then moral character doesn't matter. If a first-time senator is qualified, so is a reality TV host. If Attorneys General Holder and Kennedy are OK, then why should any of them pretend to have independence?*

Less cynically, since the Constitution grants executive power only to the president, logically, shouldn't our FBI agents and prosecutors consider themselves appendages of the president, like some Treasury Department functionaries?

But this is a mistake, because in human affairs, there are many things we ought not take to their logical consequences. Men can engineer suspension bridges and microchips with amazing precision, but those things are made with silicon and steel.

Men cannot engineer human systems that work flawlessly. Out of the crooked timber of man, Immanuel Kant noted, no straight was ever made — not even by James Madison and George Washington.

The Constitution makes Congress the superior branch — it is the boss of the executive — but gives the president full control over how to execute. It's not hard to imagine how this could (and consider how it has) created contradictions. Such contradictions don't undermine the Constitution, but they do undermine the notion that interpreting and applying it is easy.

So, yes, we want our attorneys general to be independent of politics but still subservient to the polity. And yes, we understand that this is strictly speaking impossible.

That's where norms and character enter the picture. When norms are ignored and character is in short supply, the crooked timber of mankind will produce particularly crooked results. ★

Tim Carney is the senior political columnist at the *Washington Examiner* and a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

Ben Jones, 1941-2026

Former congressman and actor best known as 'Cooter'

By Jack Hunter

STEVE HELBER/AP

Ben Jones, known to millions as the country boy mechanic Cooter Davenport in the 1980s television series *The Dukes of Hazzard*, died on Aug. 9.

His wife said on social media that Jones suffered a heart attack in his home in Washington, Virginia, while waiting to watch an Atlanta Braves baseball game. They were his favorite team. He was 84.

Before Jones would turn his acting career into a political one, he was "Crazy Cooter" Davenport, his CB handle for all seven seasons of the series that ran from 1979 to 1985. ("Breaker one, breaker one. I might be crazy but I ain't dumb. Crazy Cooter coming at you," was the character's famous refrain.)

A constant companion and accomplice to the Duke Boys, Bo Duke (John Schneider) and Luke Duke (Tom Wopat), in fictional Hazzard County, Georgia, Cooter would try to help the family do good while navigating the corrupt Mayor Boss Hogg and his band of clumsy cops. Ever resourceful, it was often Davenport who was getting Bo and Luke out of a jam.

Jones's character made a big impression on a then-youthful American Generation X in the show's first run and also on generations beyond when it went into syndication.

The hourlong, primetime, Southern-friendly CBS show originally surprised many industry experts when it became a pop culture phenomenon averaging about 40 million viewers on Friday nights. "It's become a permanent part of Americana, like Mickey Mouse or *I Love Lucy*," Jones would tell Fox News in January 2024.

Born in North Carolina and raised in Portsmouth, Virginia, Jones's Georgia connection went beyond Hazzard and baseball — he was elected to Congress in 1988 as a Democrat serving Georgia's 4th District near Atlanta and was reelected in 1990. After being redistricted out, he ran against future House Speaker Newt Gingrich in 1994 but was defeated in what would become a banner year for the GOP.

Jones used his Cooter persona in his campaigns, running as a centrist, populist Democrat.

Central to the Dukes and Jones' own Southern heritage was the controversial Confederate battle flag, which adorned the top of the General Lee, a 1969 Dodge Charger, that was basically its own character, a symbol he defended throughout his life. "I'm a member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans. I'm also a life member of the NAACP," Jones, who in his younger years had also been part of the civil rights movement, said in 2020.

"And then you see a Ku Klux Klansman waving a rebel flag and he likely has no teeth and no sense and they're pathetic people," Jones also noted. "They're sad people, and they p*** me off. And so yeah, they are desecrating a flag that my people died under."

"Our show is the sweetest, harmless, colorblind, good guys always win, nobody gets hurt," he said of the flag's appearance on the TV program. "And it had a huge black audience."

Jones published a biography in 2008 titled *Redneck Boy in the Promised Land: The Confessions of 'Crazy Cooter'* about his personal life, his experiences on the show, and in Congress.

The actor and politician always seemed to relish his character, becoming somewhat of an unofficial ambassador of the Dukes' brand until the end, opening three "Cooter's" country stores near his home in Virginia and also in Nashville and Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. Fans could purchase memorabilia or even get to experience one of the many General Lee cars used in the series.

"The Dukes of Hazzard lost another integral part of their cast today," Wopat of Luke Duke fame posted on his Instagram of Jones' passing. "Ben Jones was a fine friend and a fierce advocate of all the best things we can offer in the entertainment business."

"He will be sorely missed," Wopat added.

By more people than is probably measurable. The news of Jones's passing led some on social media to lament that part of their childhood had died along with him.

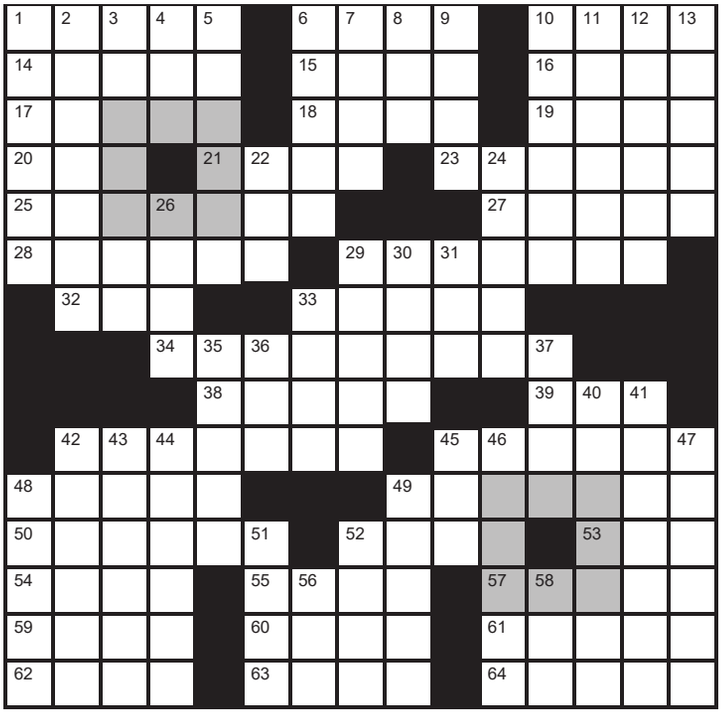
Rep. Andy Barr (R-KY), the Republican nominee to replace retiring Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-KY), paid tribute on X, writing, "As an 80's kid, Congressman Ben Jones will always be 'Cooter' to me."

To this '80s kid writer and, no doubt, countless others, too. ★

Jack Hunter (@jackhunter74) is the former political editor of Rare.us *and co-authored the 2011 book* The Tea Party Goes to Washington *with Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY).*

The White Stuff

By Brendan Emmett Quigley



ACROSS

1 Smoky curls
6 Well-off
10 With 62-Across, what the shaded squares are in this puzzle literally
14 "Have ___" (hospitable invitation)
15 Employed
16 Debtor's woe
17 ___-Roman
18 Boxing prize
19 Assuming that's true
20 Durable wood
21 Mazuma
23 Leigh of "A Streetcar Named Desire"
25 Geological period
27 Dings
28 Clay-and-water mixture
29 Talks endlessly
32 Skater Midori
33 Surrounding glows
34 School with two fraternities that was charged in 2026 for running a 10-Across
38 Drivers often change them
39 Grand Prix feature
42 Stuck one's nose in
45 Genre for Fall Out Boy and My Chemical Romance
48 "Darn!"
49 Rotten to ___
50 Batman villain ___ Quinn
52 Hall-of-Fame catcher Carlton
53 They're related
54 Sailor's saint
55 Jump over
57 Bounding main
59 Shepard in space
60 Brass
61 Who "ever loved you more than I," in song
62 See 10-Across
63 Wheel turner
64 Dig

DOWN

1 Prairie schooners
2 Nazareth native
3 Try to find
4 Lobbying grp.
5 Steamship hand
6 Moscow money
7 "Now it's clear!"
8 Animation unit
9 Cutting-edge set, briefly
10 Twaddle
11 Remove impurities from
12 Angers
13 Hoods
22 Whatever
24 "Seems likely"
26 Clip
29 Did a restaurant job
30 "Fine" or "liberal" things
31 Meadow sound
33 One of the Windsors
35 Grilled Mexican street corn
36 Short snooze
37 Fair-hiring org.
40 Talked about
41 Seven-time major-league All-Star Alfonso
42 "Do you want me to?"
43 Invader of 1066
44 Tea type
45 Sounds of doubt
46 Vietnam's ___ Delta
47 Writer
48 Harvest, as wool
49 Sir or madam
51 Lotus position discipline
52 Replenish, as a gas tank
56 Nth degree
58 Bird word

SOLUTION TO LAST WEEK'S CROSSWORD: IT'S A TOSS UP

K	I	T	K	A	T	■	M	A	S	T	■	L	P	S
I	N	H	A	L	E	■	I	L	L	U	S	I	O	N
L	I	A	B	L	E	■	S	E	A	S	H	E	L	L
O	T	T	O	■	■	T	S	E	T	S	E	■	■	■
■	■	S	B	A	R	R	O	■	E	L	I	J	A	H
C	B	S	■	M	E	A	T	S	■	E	L	A	T	E
L	E	O	■	E	L	N	I	N	O	■	A	M	O	R
A	C	T	■	N	I	S	S	A	N	S	■	E	N	E
S	A	R	I	■	C	A	R	R	I	E	■	S	C	I
P	L	U	M	P	■	M	E	L	O	N	■	T	E	N
S	M	E	A	R	S	■	G	A	N	D	H	I	■	■
■	■	■	R	E	T	O	R	T	■	■	A	S	H	E
A	N	T	E	L	O	P	E	■	C	H	I	S	E	L
M	A	R	T	I	N	E	T	■	A	U	R	O	R	A
A	N	Y	■	M	E	N	S	■	P	E	Y	T	O	N

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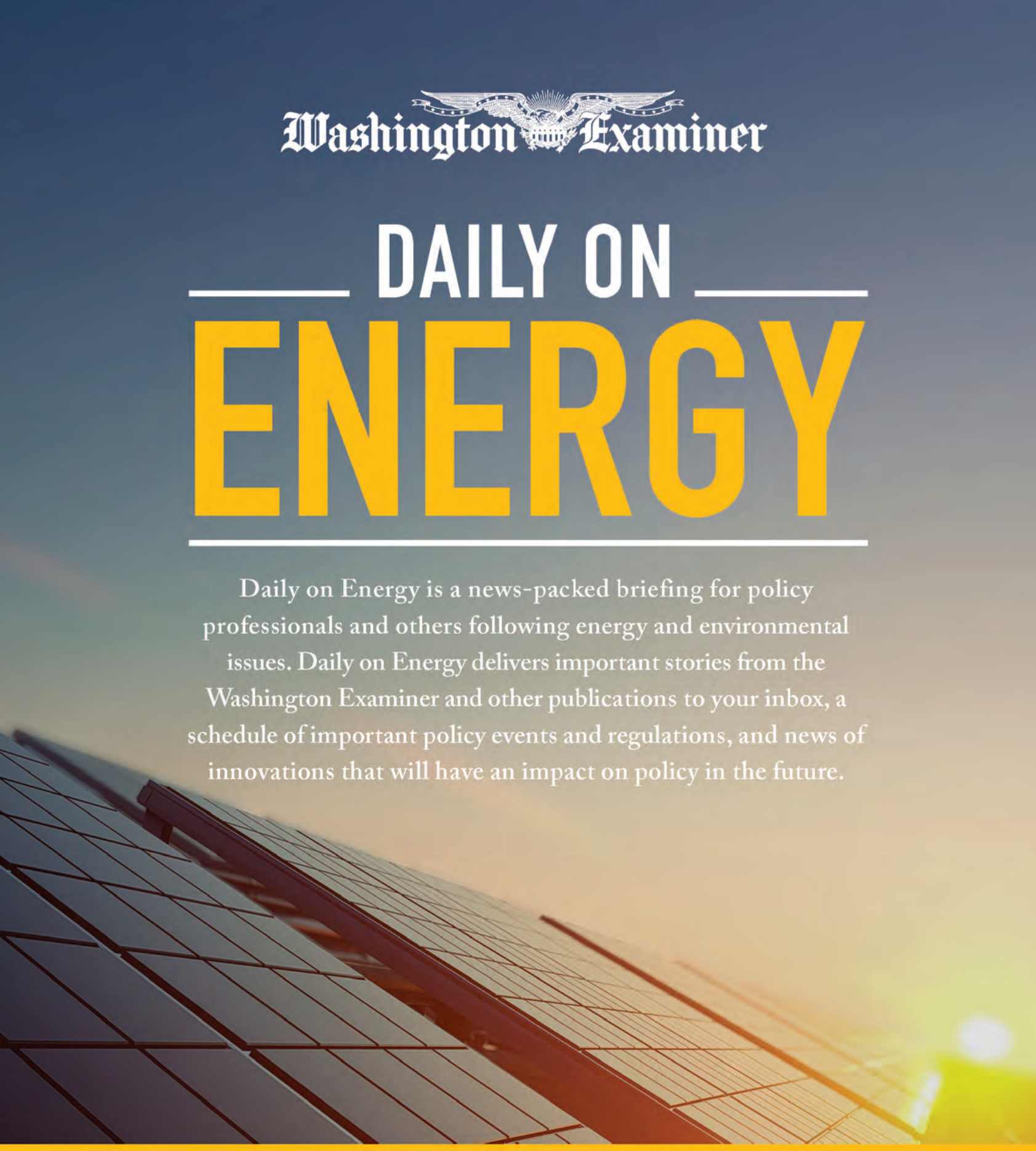

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